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# Whatever It Takes

## The Journey from Rookie Ball to the Show

**By Noah Gershwin**

The interviews in *Whatever It Takes* have been lightly edited for clarity.

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*To Will: this is for you.*

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## Foreword

*One of the craziest things (was) playing in Venezuela. There was a lot of stuff going on there. One of my teammates and I actually got robbed one night at gunpoint. I had gone out to a nightclub and I was leaving. After I left the club, I was set up, and I got robbed in a parking garage on my way out. I never told anyone though. I didn't tell the organization because I didn't want the player to get into trouble, and I also didn't want to go home.*

Hearing this confession from former professional baseball player, Ben Harrison, was one of the most memorable moments during an exciting summer before my senior year in high school. When thinking about something interesting I could do to fulfill my senior year project, I came up with the idea of writing a book of interviews with both Minor League and Major League Baseball players. In today's society, where sports dominate the media, I wanted to give young players and fans a chance to see the world of baseball through the eyes of the players themselves. So I got to work, reaching out to the public relations departments of every organization in Major League Baseball and their affiliated Minor League clubs. Many organizations said no, but I was motivated to write the book, so I continued emailing and calling front offices.

After finally securing approvals from a few teams, I set up a series of interviews. I had never done anything even remotely similar to this before, but I wrote questions, bought a recording device, and started to conduct the interviews. I ended up interviewing many players and chose ten to include in this project. The process of putting together this book has been enlightening, inspiring, and has allowed me to explore my greatest passion.

For my entire life, my world has revolved around baseball. When I was three years old, my dad took me to my first Dodgers game. This sparked my love for the game. Since that time, I have always looked up to professional baseball players as role models – heroes even. I started to play baseball myself, and after years of hitting Wiffle balls in the backyard, I joined the local West LA little league team. I played at West LA until middle school, at which point I joined the school team. I soon learned how much fun it was to be involved with the school sports culture and to share that experience with many of my good friends. In eighth grade, we won the league championship, and in my senior year of high school, I became the captain of my school's varsity baseball team.

Baseball has brought its fair share of negative memories, in addition to the positive ones. In January of my sophomore year, my best friend, Brendan, was pitching to me in the batting cage during practice. "I want to get a good one," I told him, and he threw one last pitch. I hit the ball right into the side of his head.

Initially, everyone thought Brendan was fine, including our coaches. He wasn't crying; he wasn't bleeding; he just remarked that his head hurt. *Maybe he has a mild concussion*, I remember hoping. However, when Brendan went to see the school's trainer, she was concerned. Our coach soon notified us that Brendan had gone to the hospital. I reassured myself, *He's fine, they just want to make sure there's nothing seriously wrong*.

Yet, there was something seriously wrong. When I got home, my mom called me into her room. Brendan's mom, Laura, had called – Brendan had a skull fracture and was going into emergency surgery to relieve the pressure from swelling in his brain. I didn't know how to handle the

news. So many thoughts rushed through my head – *Is he going to be okay? Oh my God, it's all my fault! Will I ever see him again?* The realization that I had hurt Brendan upset me so deeply, that I couldn't sleep – I spent the rest of the night thinking about how much he meant to me, how much I valued our friendship, and how influential he had been on my life.

Thankfully, Brendan survived the surgery, and I saw him after school the next day in the hospital. He was a bit loopy, but he was okay, and he was thrilled to see me. I gave him a card that I had gotten everyone in our grade to sign.

Through the good times and bad, the wins and losses, baseball has had an extraordinary impact on my life. I had a feeling the professional baseball players I have always looked up to might have some similarly powerful stories to tell about their experiences. This opportunity to interview my idols has been unbelievable, and I am eternally grateful to everyone who has helped me along the way.

# CHAPTER 1

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## BEN HARRISON

Drafted: 2004 by Texas Rangers (7<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: AAA

### **What is your earliest baseball memory?**

My earliest baseball memory is when I started playing baseball at nine years old, which is very late for Key West, Florida where I'm from. Most guys are starting a lot younger. My dad was a musician. My mom was an artist. I probably wasn't going to play baseball, but I had a good friend at school and his dad was a coach. I was pretty athletic, so he came by the house one day and talked to my parents and they let me play for his team.

As I said, I'm from Key West, Florida and there's a lot of Cubans. There is a strong tradition of baseball in Key West. There used to be a Minor League team there a long time ago, and actually our high school has won more state championships than any school in Florida. They might be tied with someone now, but I know we're at least tied for first with ten championships. Once I got into it, all the levels were so much fun. From that point on I was obsessed with the sport.

### **What was high school baseball like for you?**

High school baseball, the best way I can explain it, was like *Varsity Blues*, the movie. It was so cool because in Key West, at big games we would get 3,000 to 4,000 fans. All the games are on the radio and front page of the newspaper for sports, but we had to come out to play from Key West, and we were 150 miles from our closest school. So we played all the private schools and these bigger schools in Miami, but we were three and a half hours away from all of them. We were really road warriors. We used to say we were road warriors in the cheese wagon. Yeah, we spent a lot of time on the yellow school bus, so we took a lot of pride in that and we kicked a lot of Miami boys' butt which is pretty cool

In 1998 I won a state championship and we missed 26 days of school. Yeah, it was great, but typically we would leave about ten o'clock in the morning and then we would drive up. We'd get lunch in a mall or something, go to the field a little bit early, we'd play, and then get back really late, but then we'd be allowed to sleep in and we would miss a good chunk of school the next day.

### **What was college baseball like and how was that different?**

Well, I played at Florida with Keith Ramsey. College baseball was great. It was just such a good time. My freshman year I was fortunate enough to start opening day against Miami. I didn't know I was going to be a starter. It was a last-minute decision. I definitely had some ups and downs in college, but overall I felt I had a very good career at Florida. I'm not now, but I think when I left Florida I was in the top five in most categories offensively. I was a power hitting outfielder. I played a lot of center field, I met some just phenomenal friends, and I got a great education from it. I can answer more questions about it, but it was probably the best time of my life.

### **When did the college scouting process start?**

I did a couple of showcases out of high school and I became a pretty big prospect. I can't remember exactly what my rank was. I know I was in the top hundred, I don't remember exactly, but I want to say I got as high as in the seventies, but I might have been in the twenties. I don't know. I got scholarships to Miami, Florida State, Florida, LSU, and Stanford.

Those were the top five schools that I was going to decide from. I had some really good friends. Growing up, my best

friend's mother was actually a president of alumni at Florida at the time, and they were huge Gator fans. They were flying to a lot of Gator games and from a young age they were bringing me along. So at that point in time I was a little bit brainwashed and I wanted to go to Florida so bad that I chose to go to Florida on much less of a scholarship, just because I really wanted to go there. They wanted me, but they were really tight on their scholarships at the time.

**Do you regret choosing Florida or do you think that was the right choice?**

Actually, I sometimes wonder what my life or path would've been if I had gone to another school and I think it would've been really cool going down other avenues. Like my freshman year I would've won a national title if I had gone to Miami. But no, I don't regret it one bit. The college degree from Florida (I mean, trust me, I thought about man, what if I had a degree from Stanford) was great. That might've been dumb not to go there, but all in all I think it was perfect. I really was happy with the decision. I got to live with my best friend in college the whole time I was there. I signed with Texas my senior year, so I lived there in the offseason for a couple of years, and I loved being there.

**What was it like to be drafted?**

You know, what's funny is that my family and I feel like we made a lot of wrong decisions (not on purpose) that if we had to do it again we would've probably done things a lot differently. We always tried to make the right decision, but when I was drafted I was a huge prospect. Going into my junior year at Florida I was projected to go no later than the top of the second round. I played in Cape Cod twice and had just had a really good year, and my junior year in

college was okay. It wasn't great but it was good. I fell down though, and my agent really was helping me out. I don't know if we made some mistakes but I fell past the first couple rounds, and I ended up going in the fourth round with the Indians and not signing.

In the third round the Cubs were negotiating with my agent and we were trying to get \$600,000. They offered me \$550,000 and then he said, "How much do you need?" I said, "Try to get \$600,000," and they ended up not getting along and that fell through. I told the Indians not to draft me because I wasn't going to sign in the fourth round. They picked me anyway so then I went to Cape Cod to try to play and negotiate it. I also wanted to try to make some more money because I knew that they almost signed a pre-draft deal with me, and they wanted me as high as the first round or the supplemental first. So I tried to negotiate money with them and within the first week at Cape Cod I dove and severely broke my hand, like spiral fractured two bones. It really messed my hand up so at that point, I had to go back to school. So I went back to school my senior year and I turned down fourth round money with the Indians which probably was a bad idea, and then I got picked in the seventh round by the Texas Rangers as a senior.

But, to tell you the truth, I think I got blackballed from the game. I had the best year I'd ever had in college. The General Manager Mark Shapiro wasn't fond that I didn't sign and I think there were a lot of misunderstandings. Like I said, my dad was a musician and my mom had an art gallery. There were even comments like that I had hippie parents and that I didn't want to play baseball or that I wasn't hungry, because I turned down the money. I think the process works well for some people, but I think it works out really sad for other people, because you lose the potential to bargain. So your senior year you're really under



their mercy. I ended up signing for like \$27,500 in the seventh round, but if I'd done that as a junior it would've been a lot more. I think that there were some things there that hurt me and then I also think I would've had a lot better chance of playing in the big leagues if I would've just gone with Cleveland as a junior, because they would've had a lot more money invested in me.

**Were your parents supportive of your decision to be a professional athlete?**

Yeah, we were always a very strong team, and we did everything as a unit. We tried to do things right and they were my biggest supporters. They were great because if I had a bad game, they never said anything. If I had a good game, they were supportive, but if I didn't want to talk baseball, we didn't talk baseball. My dad went to as many games as he could, I mean he's flown around the world following me play. They couldn't have been better when it came to that. I really am a big believer that they didn't push me very hard, I just loved playing. I see it a lot nowadays where some parents push too much.

My dad was a musician and he wanted me to play the piano with him, but I was an athlete so he rode with it, but I mean it's not like they were forcing baseball. Then once they realized it had a chance to help pay for school, they were like, "Man, let's roll with this."

**After you signed as a professional player with the Rangers, what was your first day like?**

Well, I remember I flew with a guy named Brandon Boggs, who was a fourth rounder in Texas at the time, and he ended up being a very good friend of mine. I still stay in touch with him, but actually we rivaled each other. We

always were playing together but we were actually, I mean I never looked at it that way, but we were direct competition. He was just a great guy. I remember being in the airport and we both looked at each other. I looked at this guy and I was like, "This guy's jacked and he's chiseled." Like, this guy was good. He was looking at me like, "Man, this is a big dude himself." We were both looking at each other like, gosh. Then we had another first-rounder that showed up the same time as us. His name was Thomas Diamond and he was a huge country boy. Well, I think he was a country boy, but he was from Louisiana and we were like, "Wow man, I guess this is going to be different." That was my first day and we all went into Spokane, Washington together. That was Short Season in the Northwest league.

**As a new player to the league, how were you treated by your fellow players and coaches at the Short Season league?**

I thought it was pretty good. I think it's a lot easier of a transition for a college guy. I watched a lot of these Minor League high school guys that in my opinion really were clueless. They hadn't really been humbled in locker rooms and a lot of them just didn't have a great feel. So a lot of them didn't fit in as well. I feel like once you had played college ball it was a very easy transition. It was just a group of guys. I will say that unfortunately with Texas though, I believe I'm correct that we had three different farm directors in four years. It made it very difficult, because as soon as one started liking you, you would get a new one and he might not like you, and then we'd get another one. It was a long battle with Texas, but we had a lot of different changes in management.

It's hard to maintain relationships. Grady Fuson was the one who drafted me, but he was gone right away. He was with Texas and then went to San Diego. Then it was Scott Servais. There were three in four years. That part was really tough, but I had to work with Texas. That was one of the things that I wonder if it would've been just a little bit easier with Cleveland. They made me play at every level. I played Short Season. I did Instructional League. I did Low-A. I did High-A. I was the first guy that they sent to the Dominican Instructional League.

This was before they even decided to build these new facilities. I went and stayed in this facility as an experiment. I joked around that they were trying to get me to quit. I was in a bunk room with three other guys connected with another room that had six Latin guys. The bathroom was down the hall with no toilet seats, and the drains were clogged. For every meal they had a big new trash can that they put juice in and we'd scoop it out. We were kind of using the jail trade. We were roughing it, but what was so cool was that we were getting a chance to see how these Latin guys were living and where they were coming from. It just reminded me how tough they were and I thought, "Man, if I can't man-up and deal with this...I don't know." I enjoyed it and I just rolled with it but a lot of the other American guys didn't handle it so well.

**How else was the Dominican League different than other leagues?**

Oh, it was nuts. My parents have traveled a lot so they were really big on saying, "Hey man, this is a great opportunity. Go enjoy it." My dad can speak fluent Spanish, not because he's got any background with it, but because he's lived in different countries. So I went over, excited about it, but it was an Instructional League. I didn't

play in the winter ball league. I was drafted at 21, so I was maybe 22 to 24. I can't remember, but it was funny. I was playing with a bunch of 15-year-old Dominican kids. I was much older and a lot bigger than these guys. We were riding around and playing ball on these fields that are hidden in the middle of nowhere with roosters running wild. We had wide-open dugouts. It was different. I thought, "What am I doing here? I don't really belong here." But I had fun and made good friends. You have to learn how to enjoy it. I didn't have TV and I didn't bring a bunch of books, so we'd just sit outside. We'd listen to music, get to know each other, talk to each other, and just kind of hang out. You learn to have fun doing it.

**How is each level of the minors different from the previous one, and what was better or worse from level to level?**

I would have to say the biggest difference for me is the manager and the facilities. You could get lucky and have, like in AA, a big league stadium in Texas. I mean it was unbelievable, but then in Low-A and High-A, our fields were pretty bad. It really depended on just how much you enjoyed being there. When I was in High-A in Bakersfield, California there was a guy named Pat Osborne. He was with the Indians. He's real close with Keith Ramsey. He's actually a coach now with the Yankees in their A-ball, but I got to live with his parents one year, which was so nice. I mean, they didn't charge me anything. I got to live in a nice house, and they cooked dinner for me every night. You might get a cool host family or a cool scenario and it's just amazing, but you could get a bad host family. You could also get some rough circumstances at the field that makes you not look forward to going to the field every day. Those things play a big part in it, especially when you're trying to stay healthy and finish a season, because it's really a drive.

As for competition, I'd have to say it definitely started increasing when you hit High-A, which was definitely better than Low-A. I thought AA was really good. I mean, I thought there was the most talent in AA, and then I thought AAA had a lot. There were a lot more crafty guys that had played the game and had been up to the big leagues. These were the kind of guys that you know you could trust, if someone got hurt, to go up to the big leagues. But some of those guys were pretty bitter. A lot of those guys were upset because they had been in the big leagues and now they were back in the Minor Leagues. You could end up with a great group of guys or you could have a bunch of guys that were sour in AAA. In AA, there were a lot of young guys that were just really good guys throwing really hard and just a lot of talent.

**Did travelling far for high school games prepare you for the travel that comes with being a Minor League player?**

Now that you say that, it probably was a little easier for me in the minors. I never really thought of it at the time, but I always enjoyed the bus time. I was a big card game guy. I always played Pluck. I don't know if you're familiar with Pluck but it was like a spade game, and it was a two-on-two game. We would literally play that every single trip. We'd bring it out and my partner and I would play against another pair. We'd put a bucket in the middle, play cards, and before you knew it we were there. That helped a lot. Some people hated it, but it didn't bother me too much. Sometimes it was tough on the body, but I always loved hanging out with the guys. I never really thought of it as such a burden.

**How were the hotels and food as you were progressing through the Minor Leagues?**

I was very used to it. I had done it my whole life so it didn't bother me. I liked it. The harder part was that some hotels were really nice, but some were really bad. Some hotels would cut out the air some nights. The farther up you got, the better they were. Normally, the higher the level, the better the hotels were.

AAA was a little bit harder in my opinion because you had to fly. You would think it's easier because you're flying but you always had to catch the early flight. You'd play a night game and then by the time you were winding down it was already really late, but if you went to sleep, you had to wake up at 4:30, and that's almost worse. I mean, I knew some guys that would just pull all-nighters and stay up, which is tougher, but they would do that and then when they got back, they'd sleep throughout the day. Or you could take 3-4 hour naps, and just be groggy through the airport, but then you were looking to find a spot on the floor or a chair. It was such an uncomfortable feeling when we were just so tired, but you had to go through security. I feel like that was pretty hard. The AAA travel could really wear on you.

**Did you ever have a bad roommate experience?**

Usually, I got a pretty good roommate. Some people like to just have their own room, but I always enjoyed having a roommate. I enjoyed the company, and all-in-all I really didn't mind it. They were pretty solid. For the most part we got to pick our own roommates, so unless you couldn't find someone to stay with it was fine. When you first came in they might have just thrown you in with someone, but I like to consider myself pretty easygoing and I felt like I got along with everyone on the team. Yeah, I had really good experiences with roommates. I never had one that I had any issues with.

**What were your goals when you started your professional career and how did they change as you progressed through the levels?**

It's weird, because from high school on, there was never one doubt in my mind that my goal was to try to play in the big leagues. I don't really know why that came about, but I just felt like I was going to do it, so that was always my goal. I always tried to go one level at a time. When I was in High-A, I was just seeing what I could do to get to AA, then I'd get to AA. It was overwhelming, but it would ease up and you would figure out how to get to the next level. You had to really trick your mind and understand that you're doing this over and over and over and you have to stay so even-keeled. You can't get too high or get too low depending how you're doing because you have so many games and all-in-all you can't even think of that. You've just got to go to the yard and play and just let things happen. However, if you put the effort in and you prepare, at the end of the day you're not going to be mad at yourself. You might not be happy where you are, but that's how I tried to look at it. I tried to trick my mind into not thinking about the big picture, I just prepared and went as hard as I could daily.

**Was there ever a moment where you wanted to quit and if so, how did you overcome that?**

The toughest point of my career was when I was 26 years old. I think it was the end of 2006, and I had just had a really monster year with Texas. I was runner-up for player of the year. Then I went down in the Minor Leagues and then I went down to Venezuela and I was doing really well. I mean, I was in the top five in the league in about every category and I felt like things had finally clicked. I'd moved up with Texas. I was a huge prospect for

them. They were talking about me in Baseball America. They wanted to push me. The path was there for me, and I dove for a ball, and that's when I had a fourth-degree AC separation down in Venezuela. That was just the hardest thing to deal with. They had to put a screw into my throwing shoulder.

It took me about a year and a half, maybe two years, before I really was playing the way I could've been. It was my top hand. It was my throwing arm and it was a bad injury. I dove for the ball and my shoulder went down. I remember the second baseman being Alberto Callaspo. He had a lot of big league time and I remember him coming over to me and he just went, "Oh, fuck!" so I knew it was bad. I didn't feel any pain, but I went into the training room and I told them I thought I was about to have a heart attack. While I was talking to them I just passed out. So I was stuck in another country for about three days, and when I got back to the U.S., I had to have immediate surgery. There were a couple of events that happened after that, but to the best of my memory, typically it's five or six years after you sign that they count you eligible for the Rule 5 Draft. Right before I was hurt I was eligible for the Rule 5 Draft but in the big leagues, the Union, they'd never done this before. Then they changed the rules in baseball, they argued it, and they pushed it back to the following year.

So the year that I was supposed to be eligible for the Rule 5 Draft, but when I just had my best year, they changed that rule in baseball which they'd never done, and they made it from five years to six years. So instead of coming off of my best year and Texas having to protect me on the 40-man (or another team would've picked me up), we waited another whole year which was the year after my injury and I was terrible. So I went from being a star player to very average and I couldn't even really hit well. I struggled in AA. I got

sent back down to High-A. I was struggling there too, because I was hurt. There were times that I remember having some breaks, and I remember one time in my career when I was so down, and then it just clicked. I was like, "Man, I'm done feeling like this. I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me. I'm good. I got this." I can't describe it, but something just clicked. I was determined to get through it and I did, but there were some very tough times when I was hurt and I couldn't play, so I wasn't really wanted. I don't ever remember wanting to quit, but I do remember being so frustrated and just not knowing what to do.

**How did you maintain your composure when you were feeling low and dealing with being injured?**

I don't know. I knew that I just wanted to play baseball so bad and there was nothing that was going to stop me. They were either going to tell me I couldn't do it, or I was going to keep going. Baseball was all I'd ever done, it was what I wanted to do, and the option of quitting never even crossed my mind. It was like I had to make sure that I did well enough to not give them a chance to release me. That was more my worry, but I had a lot of obstacles that came about. I don't know how much in-depth you want to go, and you probably know some other people with hardships, but I had some tough obstacles. I had a son right around the same time. He's seven years old now and I have a phenomenal relationship with his mother, but I had a son when I was in AA whose birth I wasn't able to see, because I was scared that if I went to see it I would get released.

There really were some tough obstacles. There was a time in spring training that I thought for sure I was going to make the AAA team and a couple of other teams. I remember the White Sox tried to ask me if Texas would pick me up if I was going to get released, and Texas said I

was going to make the AAA team, but I didn't. They told them that, which wasn't the case, and then they put me on the Phantom DL. I remember going to AA and I was on the DL for a long time. I remember just practicing every day. I couldn't play for a long time and then finally about a month into it, they put me on a roster and from that point on I was so ready, and I'd worked so hard. I had missed a month and a half I think it was, but by the time they let me play, I hit .330 with 16 home runs. I made the all-star team and I almost won the home run derby. Then I got moved to AAA. The only guy that was in front of me that was log-jamming it was Nelson Cruz. So there were a lot of moments that felt like it would've been very easy to give up.

**How did you balance maintaining a relationship, having a son, and having a career?**

It was tough. His mother and I decided not to be in a relationship, but we decided that we were going to do everything for my son. As a team, we really did everything we could that was best for him. She flew out and saw me in AAA and my family was very supportive and helped me out. My family actually had to help me financially, in order to help her out, and at times they had to help me in the Minor Leagues, because they just weren't paying us anything. If I didn't have some of their help financially, I don't know if I could've played as long as I did. That was always tough. I just wanted to play in the big leagues so badly, and I was so driven. It never really felt like a burden. It never felt like it was weighing on me. I wish I could've seen him more, but I knew what the circumstances were. I just had to grind on, but that's one of the reasons I stopped playing. I was playing in Italy my last year, my son had just turned four, and I realized that he was getting older. He was going to start remembering a lot of things,

and I was constantly going to different places. He had a lot to do with why I decided to hang up my cleats, and I actually got a job, so I live close to him now. I really have a great relationship with him.

**Looking back, do you still think quitting was the right choice?**

It was a tough decision. There are a lot of guys you're probably not as familiar with, many big leaguers, Minor Leaguers, and other guys who went through this. There's actually a group that's been put together recently on Facebook that is only for ball players that have played professionally, and you'd be surprised at how many guys that spent their whole life doing this are depressed, don't know what they're doing, and really don't know how to handle it. Baseball really doesn't put you in a good position for life after your career ends. A lot of guys don't have degrees, they only did baseball, and they've been doing it for ten years. The transition (and I still don't know if I've fully dealt with it) when you stop playing is just tough and it really beats up a lot of players.

**What do you think were the highest and lowest moments of your career?**

I would have to say I think the highest time was right before I got hurt in Venezuela and I was just runner-up for Player of the Year. I knew I'd figured it out, and that there was nothing that was going to stop me. I remember feeling like, "I got this. I'm on my way." Unfortunately, I got hurt. The lowest I would say was the first time I got released. I started the year in AAA with Texas and I had a couple of injuries and ended up going back down to AA. After I got released I got picked up by the Marlins in High-A to finish the season. I think that was a pretty low time for

me, because they started me in AAA when I was feeling so prepared, thinking I was one guy away from getting to the big leagues, and the next thing you know, I'm padding stats for an A-ball team in the Marlins.

**When you got to AAA were you expecting to make it to the big leagues, or was that not really on your mind?**

There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to play in the big leagues. I'm little bit rusty now, but there's no doubt in my mind that I was a lot better than a lot of the guys that are still playing. You just have to learn to deal with it. There are a lot of people out there like you, and so much of it is about luck and timing. It's about staying healthy way more than people realize. It's so hard to stay healthy throughout the year. You really just have to deal with the fact that sometimes there are other guys out there like you, and you just can't be too hard on yourself. There are guys that got there that weren't very good, and there are guys that were as good, if not better than you, that didn't get there. So I think that's the toughest thing for people to deal with.

**Who do you think was the best player you ever played with?**

I got a chance to see Josh Hamilton a little bit when I was at Texas. I would have to say from what I saw, and just getting to play with them, Nelson Cruz. I always felt like I was someone that could hit the ball farther than other people. I felt like I had some talent that other people didn't, and seeing this guy, I was just in awe of him. I was like, "Wow, this guy's legit." He was putting up Nintendo-like numbers in AAA. He's also done it in the big leagues. I think of him when it comes to size, ability, and tools (and he had some adversity that people really don't know

about). Texas tried to make him a pitcher, and we couldn't figure out why they were doing it, but he almost didn't even get to the big leagues or get to stay playing in the big leagues with Texas as an outfielder. He told them, "Nope, that ain't happening," and he actually was platooning with Jason Botts, another really talented player. He and Nelson Cruz were getting switched up and they never really gave either of them a chance to play every day. Both of them weren't doing well with that. Nelson Cruz should've been in the big leagues, in my opinion, long before he was, but he was in AAA. That's when he was putting up those unreal numbers.

**Did the team ever try to make you change position or dramatically change your swing?**

I feel like they tried to change my swing every day, but not my position. Later on I did some independent ball. I got to play a little bit of first base, but position-wise they never tried to change me. As I said, I was an outfielder. The hardest part was when there was a new hitting rover or a new coach that would come to town, and your swing would just feel great. But they'd come in and say, "Here, do this, do this, do this," and they'd watch you play so you felt like you had to do what they were trying to show you. We used to joke around they put you right in the frump, and you could've been playing so well, but then they'd come to town. However, if you didn't do what they were saying, they didn't feel like you were trying to get to the big leagues, or you weren't coachable. That's one of the things I regret the most; not doing my thing a little bit more and just dealing with it. I think there are a lot of guys that got to the big leagues by just taking their swing there. Obviously, they listened to some of the coaching, but they got there, pretty much taking the swing they always had. I always tried to be so coachable, and I always tried to do exactly

what they were saying, and I think a lot of times it messed me up.

**Did you ever get in conflicts with players or coaches throughout your career?**

I had a couple of conflicts. I got in a fight with a Latin guy in Short Season. We were both cranky after a long road trip and it was over leaving the bus dirty. We got in a scuffle, but the next day we were fine. We both got suspended for a game so we sat in the stands together and kind of laughed about it. That was the only scuffle I'd ever been in with a teammate while playing. I definitely had some words with people and got in a few arguments with some coaches that I wish I hadn't. They can hold that against you and no matter if you get over it or not, they hold your future in their hands. I definitely know that one time I told the wrong person to *you know what*, and he held it against me. So when he got the opportunity to release me, he used it. I do know that for sure.

**Have you ever done or seen any of your teammates do steroids?**

I never saw anybody do them. There are some guys that I thought might have and I heard about guys that were. My first year when I got into the league, they were testing all of us Minor Leaguers, so we were pretty clean. I didn't really know anyone with Texas at the time that was doing them. The problem was that they weren't testing them in the big leagues. So here we were getting tested thoroughly in the Minor Leagues, but all the guys in the big leagues were not. There are a lot of guys that were taking stuff, so they were able to play well into ages in their career that they shouldn't have. It made the Minor Leagues really log-jammed. That was the hardest part. I played with some

guys that I had heard were doing it. I never actually saw them do steroids, but I know it was out there. I think it was happening a lot more in the big leagues at the time, to tell you the truth.

**As a player who was not using steroids and wanted to make it to the big leagues, did it bother you to know there were guys using the drugs who were already there?**

It killed me. To this day I'm still pretty frustrated with it, because I felt like I was a guy who could run and I actually had power, and I didn't need steroids to have the power that people were able to access through this drug. They were able to access one of the tools that I was given, and not many people are given a lot of raw power. It made it very tough, and I do think if it would've been in a different era, it would have been a lot easier for me to get to the big leagues. So yes, it sucks, because there were guys that were able to do things that they wouldn't have been able to. I think that was the hardest part. I never even thought about taking steroids, because I didn't need to do it. Still to this day, that frustrates me.

**With that mindset, do you feel that players like Bonds, McGuire, and Sosa should be in the Hall of Fame?**

Actually, I've never really cared. I've never really thought about the Hall of Fame as a big deal. I mean, I know it's a big deal, but I guess I never really looked at it that way. I've always just judged whether someone was good or not. If I had to decide, I would probably say that they should be there. My honest opinion is that Barry Bonds was probably one of the best players – if not the best player - in the game, before steroids. I also think that other people doing them made him think he should start doing them. Then he was

even better than them after taking the steroids. I think he had a hard time watching other people play better than he did, when he knew they weren't truly better, but were cheating. It's a very tough one. I feel like there's probably a lot of pressure to be the best, especially when you know you are better than them. However, I partly say they shouldn't be in the Hall of Fame. I think the problem is that there's just a lot of people that did it who never got caught. It's hard to say whether they should be allowed or not. But Bonds - there's no question in my mind that he's just unbelievable. I have no problem with him being there.

**Did you or your teammates have any baseball superstitions?**

I remember at certain times I had a thing with batting gloves. If I was hitting well with them, I definitely wouldn't change them. There were some bad, not PG superstitions. There were definitely things players would say about the slump busters, and those things were going on in baseball. There are definitely superstitions in baseball, but I wasn't really very superstitious. A lot of guys were more so than me. I would say if I had some batting gloves that were doing well, I kept them. Other than that I wasn't very big on it.

**What was the craziest thing one of your teammates did?**

I'm trying to think of what I can say and not get into trouble. Probably one of the craziest things would be just playing in Venezuela. There was a lot of stuff going on there. One of my teammates and I actually got robbed one night at gunpoint. I had gone out to a nightclub and I was leaving. After I left the club, I was set up, and I got robbed in a parking garage on my way out. I never told anyone though. I didn't tell the organization, because I didn't want



the player to get into trouble, and I also didn't want to go home. I was having so much fun there, and I loved playing there, so I would say that was definitely at the top of the list.

**What is your favorite hobby to do other than baseball?**

This is going to sound pretty lame to you, but what I loved about baseball even more than the game, was working out, and I loved preparing for the game. I used to always get so excited about how great the season was going, because I was in such good shape or I was so prepared. I've always just loved working out. Still to this day, probably my favorite thing to do is work out and stay in shape. I look forward to doing it every day. There is actually something else I really enjoy. I've taken up surfing and I'm a big fan. It's so cool and I had never even been exposed to waves where I am from. Now where I live there are waves, and it's awesome.

**What's your favorite thing and least favorite thing about being a professional baseball player?**

I would have to say what was really great about baseball as a whole, was that people universally really liked what you did. Now that I don't play baseball, I do commercial business insurance. When I played baseball, everyone was so amazed and wanted to talk about how cool that was. When you get into something else, it's just not the same. It's a universal thing that people love the game of baseball and sports, and they really admire what you're doing. I think I miss that a lot. Also, I enjoy the team comradery. I miss that more than anything, just being with the guys. That's probably what I miss the most. As far as the least – I do not miss hurting. When I could stay healthy, I was as good as anyone, but I had a lot of injuries. I think a

lot of it had to do with working out and trying to be strong, but every year I felt like I was just trying to stay healthy.

**Has being a professional baseball player affected your love of the game at all?**

Now I only watch it occasionally. I still have a very tough time even watching a full baseball game without getting upset. So yes, being a professional player has affected my love of the game. I've had numerous chances to work with kids and help them out, but with the route my career has taken, I'm just not ready yet. I think I will be ready someday, and I think I'm going to give back a lot to the game in certain instances. But right now I have a really tough time watching it, because I just feel like I should still be playing.

**Do you ever think to yourself about making a comeback?**

It has crossed my mind, but I try to be logical about it. It's been about three years and I haven't played, because I played internationally for a couple years. So realistically I could go play overseas right now in my opinion, but to get back and have a chance at the big leagues...I think the chances are slim to none. Unless I'm going to be playing in the big leagues, I'm okay not playing.

**If you could go back in time and talk to yourself as you were starting your professional career, what would you tell yourself?**

I feel like for the most part of my career I was very disciplined. I didn't drink a ton. I was very into keeping my body healthy and injuries bothered me. There were a couple of times when I slipped up and went out a little too much. I

wouldn't say I did it a ton, but at times I feel like if I could do it again, there were a couple of times in my career that I wish I would've maybe not been quite as wild. It really wasn't my character to always do that, but there were some times when I ran pretty hard.

# CHAPTER 2

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## BRIAN HENDERSON

Drafted: 2003 by Tampa Bay Devil Rays (7<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: AAA

### **What is your earliest baseball memory?**

There are a couple that come to mind. The first one was when I was in tee-ball, and I hit the ball, but I didn't run all the way to first base. I thought I was out so I ran back to the dugout. My dad happened to be the umpire, because we had volunteer umpires, and he pointed to me sitting in the dugout and called me out. So I didn't even know the rules back then, I was so dumb. Another one was that I remember looking through my glove in right field at the action. They always stuck me in right field. I was just picking daisies out there. That's probably all I remember, except in tee-ball I did make one double-play, which is pretty rare.

### **Did you play baseball throughout your childhood?**

I have kind of an interesting story about that. I've played baseball every year, every season of my life, like you said, pretty continuously. But during the last year of little league, there were All-Star tryouts and I got cut, so I didn't play on the All-Stars that summer. And then when I was a freshman in high school (I went to a big high school), I was actually cut from my freshman team, and I had to go play this "little league" big league. It was for kids that wanted to keep playing after eighth grade that weren't good enough to play high school ball. I actually had a lot of fun doing it. I remember sitting on my parents' couch at age 14 when I was a freshman trying to decide what to do; whether I should keep playing baseball or do something else. And I just decided to play that extra season of amateur ball (not high school ball), and I remember being so determined and working out a lot during that off-season. Then I came back and made the freshman team my sophomore year. Then, in my junior year I made varsity, and in my senior year I was on varsity. After that, I walked-on to the University of

Houston team. When I was a sophomore people started saying things like, "Hey, you might get drafted," because we had a really good team my sophomore year in college. We had two second-rounders and a bunch of guys drafted off of that team, so all the scouts were always coming around. Then, during my junior year I got drafted, and I played until I was 28. 2010 was my last year. So I played seven professional seasons, but started from tee-ball all the way through.

### **What was that scouting process like in college? Were they scouting you specifically?**

It's interesting, because it was actually more my team. I wasn't a starter. I was a relief pitcher, so my junior year, which was my last year at U of H, they had a bunch of guys coming to watch our Friday night starter. This guy named Brad Sullivan went to the Oakland A's. He went right after that book *Moneyball* came out about the A's. He was in the draft right around that time, so he was one of the short (he was six feet) players, but he was a six-foot right-hander out of college. So they took him in the first round, and then our closer got taken in the first round, and he was actually a draft-eligible sophomore. Then, that same year, we had a fifth-rounder, another pitcher (our Saturday night starter). So we had a bunch of scouts all the time at our games, which was great. I was in the bullpen. I was just mixing in and out of those three guys, Brad, and Danny Zell.

I don't know if you know Michael Bourn, but he's still playing. He was my freshman college roommate at U of H. So I can turn on the TV and get to see a bunch of guys that I played with.

Bourn was our center-fielder. When he was a freshman, he could not hit the ball out of the batting cage. I mean, it was

terrible. He was so bad, and he was from this inner-city high school in Houston, and the program wasn't very good. They got beat all the time. But for whatever reason this guy can run super-fast and he hits left-handed, so everybody just loved him. I mean, he could run the ball down anywhere in center field, but he actually got hurt his freshman year. He tried to drag bunt as a leftie and he had the barrel of the bat way out in front, and the ball glanced off the bat and hit him right in the eye, which put him out for three or four months.

Back to the scouting process, all those guys were just around and I would get business cards. They actually have business cards that say Area Scout Royals or they say Mariners or Yankees or whatever. I actually have a stack of business cards that were put in my locker. I kept them, because I feel like it's an accomplishment to be recognized for all your hard work and what you've put in, the fruits of your labor type of thing. That kind of started after my sophomore year, and in the fall of my junior year I had to make a decision about whether to stay in college or leave, or take the signing bonus. I had an agent at the time, Billy Martin Jr., and he always wears his dad's rings and stuff like that. He helped me pretty good on what type of money I had to get and with the pros and cons of staying versus leaving. Also, he was actually my advisor at the time. I couldn't call him my agent because of the NCAA. I don't know if you know a lot about the scouting process in college, but you have an extra year of eligibility so you can re-enter the draft. The more negotiating things you have, the higher or better the opportunities, such as a higher bonus or whatever. So if I had waited until my senior year I probably could've gotten \$2,000, but some guys actually fail the physical. I had a friend who signed after his senior year with the Cubs, they flew him out to Phoenix, and they had the team doctors check him out. He had a torn labrum,

and he was 22. I mean, he was a leftie and he only threw 82-84 and he had a good changeup, but he was just a senior sign. So they gave him \$2,000, bought him a ticket to Phoenix, checked him out, his labrum was torn up, and they said see you later. He was a Chicago Cub for like a week, you know? So it depends.

I also got some college scholarship money afterward. So when I got released in 2008, I played independent ball for a year and a half, and in that last part of the year I had to start using my college money or I would lose that part of the contract that I signed when I left. So that's pretty much what the process is like. I was never scouted as a high school player. I was terrible, I threw really slow, and I was small. I just happened to be a late bloomer I guess, and I was on really good teams with first-rounders, so that's how I got my shot.

**What did it feel like to be drafted by the Rays? Were you surprised that you were actually going to be part of a professional franchise?**

I had already talked with the scout so much, so I guess I didn't really touch on that too much. Usually, toward the end when the draft starts to come, which is in June, it means around April and May you start to talk to these scouts, or there are pro days. It's kind of like when football has their scouting combines or whatever. They may ask you to throw a bullpen or whatever, or hit in the cage. They can ask you to do that as a scout. Then we sat up in the press box (either on a Saturday or during the week between classes), and there were around fifteen to twenty scouts in there asking questions. Because I was a pretty good student, they asked things like, "You're sure you want to go play baseball? Don't you want to get your degree? Do you really love this? Do you really want to do it?" and things

like that. They asked us questions to find out if we were for real and basically if we had skeletons in our closets, things like that. I kind of knew that the guy liked me, so it wasn't so much a big deal to me, it was more a big deal to all my teammates, which was really cool because they knew how hard I had worked. Basically when I did my three years at U of H, I stayed late and got there early. There was no formula, no secret, you just have to put in the time and work. I would go to practice early and do my drills and then stay after practice and do another set of drills for three years straight. I just kept getting better every day. That was the best thing when all my teammates and my coach came up to me and congratulated me. I mean, I kind of knew the round I was going to go into, and the team, so I wasn't super surprised, but as soon as you get the call it seems like your phone just blows up. You have twenty or thirty people calling you. People were calling my dad and my brother-in-law out of the blue like, "Hey, is this Brian? Is this the real Brian? Did he get drafted?" So that was cool. I mean, it was fun to be able to go that high in the draft, the seventh round. It was like I said, a testament to all the hard work that I'd done.

**Do you regret your decision to leave U of H for your last year?**

I would probably stick with my decision. I mean, it was like a fork in the road and if I had stayed at U of H, I probably would've given up the dream totally. I really think I would've. It was like one or the other; either get a degree and just go work in a cubicle, or have this amazing opportunity. I had a couple more classes so I would've been a fifth-year senior taking classes at U of H for engineering, but not being able to play baseball probably, because I would've had to take those classes. It's just different because I could've been that guy who gets the

\$2,000 and then, maybe, I would have a torn labrum and they would just send me home after one summer. So I really feel like it was my absolute best shot to make the big leagues; to leave after my junior year. Honestly, the team has more invested in you. It comes down a lot of times to dollars and numbers. You have to keep in mind that there's a lot of left-handers out there, and for every one person that gets drafted, there are a bunch of guys already in their system that do what you do.

**What was your first day of professional baseball like?**

This is interesting, because I got sent straight to a full season in Low-A. There are six levels: the lowest guys are rookies, then Short Season A-ball. Those two are designed to start in the middle of June right after the draft. So most people that are high school kids, they'll go to the draft; they'll sign and then they'll go start a brand new team, a brand new season, all at once. I jumped that level and I started at Low-A in Charleston, so my first experience was jumping into a team that had already been together for four months, which definitely made me the new kid on the block. They didn't send anybody else from that draft to a higher level, so I was kind of put on a fast-track. I was with guys that had played maybe three or four years of pro ball and I was brand new to it. So I flew (I didn't have a car) to Charleston, South Carolina from Houston, and I think I got checked out by the doctors. I had to wait a couple days for the physical to go through, and in the meantime I was playing catch, throwing bullpens, and making friends and things like that.

They have an agreement with apartment complexes, and my first roommates were these two twin brothers from Iowa. They were 6'2, maybe 6'4, and they were both left-handed starting pitchers. It was crazy. They were named

Jason and Nathan Cromer and they signed out of high school in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> round. Like, first round they took Jason and then eighth round they took Nathan, but they had already been in it for three years and they were high school kids, so there was some immaturity there; a difference between somebody that goes to college and then somebody that comes from a small town in Iowa. And then I had other people on the team that didn't speak any English that were from the Dominican Republic.

I also had this one guy, Elijah Dukes, who was from gangs in Miami. He was a hardcore thug, but we actually got along really well throughout his career. He ended up making it to the big leagues. So my first experience with pro ball was in Charleston, a beautiful city. Bill Murray (the comedian) owns part of that team and they held Silent Night events. People would bring their dogs. We would have an eleven o'clock game, and they would just let people bring their dogs! There were water parks everywhere and dogs doing Slip 'n' Slides, and we were trying to play a serious baseball game. There was all this funky stuff going on, but it was fun. I got pretty homesick that first year, because I didn't have a car and I didn't know what I was going to be doing, or how long it was going to be, but I had fun.

**Do you know what was behind the team's decision to send you to the RiverDogs, rather than one of the Short Season teams?**

So there's the GM, and then there's the Scouting Director. The Scouting Director's son was the scout. I think he was the Area Scout. He wasn't a Cross-Checker. The Scouting Director's son, Jonathan Bonifay, was the Area Scout that drafted me in the seventh round. The Scouting Director's name was Cam Bonifay. I have a feeling that they were

thinking that I would be on the fast-track to being a left-handed specialist in the big leagues. This guy saw me pitch at Tulane, saw me pitch against Rice, saw me pitch a couple times when I had a really good slider, and so he was thinking that I would be a good lefty specialist and that's all I would do. They just drafted me, not to develop me or anything like that, just to do that. So when I first started playing in Charleston I had a curveball, a slider, and I was working on a changeup, but I liked my curveball. The pitching coach came to me after a month of pitching and said, "You can't throw your curveball anymore because the Scouting Director wants you to throw only sliders. No more curveballs." I thought I had a pretty good curve-ball, even though it was a good compliment to my slider. So I was telling him all this, and he said, "Nope, you can't throw it anymore." It was because they were trying to get me to be just a slider lefty specialist. I thought, "Okay, whatever." Later on, this same guy, Xavier Hernandez, was trying to get me to drop down and be a side-arm lefty and it never really worked out; totally different mechanics and it just threw me off. They do that sometimes; they'll take pitches away from guys. They'll say, "Well, you can't throw your slider anymore. You have to throw your changeup only." It's because in the lower levels it's not so much about numbers, it's about other peoples' opinions of you, honestly. Let's say this guy's dad was a Scouting Director, and he had a good opinion of my slider. Maybe he thought the slider was going to be a big league pitch, not the curveball, so he said, "Can the curveball."

That was in my first month of playing, so I feel like I was funneled that way into my role. Not as a starter, or anything like that. He just said, "Okay, we drafted you to be a lefty specialist, to get two guys out." At the time I think the Red Sox had Ortiz and the Yankees had somebody really big that was just killing it. It was the Yankees and the Red Sox

on the AL East side of things. It was before the 2008 race when it flipped and we started winning the division. It was always the Yankees and the Red Sox. So they were trying to draft people to strike those guys out, so that's probably why. I think they didn't really want to develop me much as a player, a starter, or as a complete pitcher, they just wanted me to be able to get lefties out. Once I did that, then I could get promoted.

**Did it upset you to have them controlling which pitches you were able to throw and your trajectory going through the Minor Leagues?**

It was... different. I felt like I wanted to be, I guess, a company man; do what the coaches asked of me and do it well. But on the other side I thought, "Well, I want to do what I'm comfortable with." I'm a competitor. I want to get people out. I don't want to mess around with a changeup when I don't have a good changeup. I want to throw my slider and get them out, you know? So it was hard for me to try to experiment with different arm angles. I just wanted to get outs, and put up good numbers, and win, so that was kind of the frustrating part; being comfortable with it but also taking a hit on the field when I'm trying to learn something new. So there's always that feeling when you want to make sure you remember that it's an art. Every guy's different and you want to make sure he's in a league that's competitive enough for him, where he is in his career. That's why people get promoted up and demoted down. They'll just say, "Hey, we want you to work on stealing bases. We know you can hit at this level, or we know you can pitch at this level, we just want you to work on your slider for me," so that's why I decided that as long as I am able to get people out with what I'm doing, then I'm happy.

**How were you treated by players and coaches when you were new to the league and joined the RiverDogs?**

Every team was different. On that team there were a lot of practical jokers. There was a lot of keeping guys loose. I was called an F.N.G., which everybody gets called for a while; the Fuckin' New Guy. They don't bother to learn your name or anything, but that lasts for about a month and then they learn your name, and then the new guy is F.N.G. So that's the thing, there are so many moves going up and down throughout the course of a season, that you'd be sitting next to a guy, dressing next to him, and then the next day he's on a plane somewhere else. He's gone. Maybe you don't even get to see him again. There's just a lot of movement, so there's definitely some preference to the guys that have been there for a while, the longest.

There's a lot of good-natured ribbing, and then there's patience you know; I felt a lot of patience with the coaches and the brass (I guess you'd call it). So there are coaches, there are Scouting Directors, and there are Minor League Coordinators. All these people are judging you. At the beginning, they just want to see how you adapt, so there's not a whole lot of pressure to perform. Honestly, you're going to put that on yourself anyway. I put it on myself to do well my first month or two, thinking, "I don't want to just stink it up." They tell you, "Hey, we drafted you for a reason, we don't care, really, how well you do, we're going to be keeping up on you." They write reports every day and those people, the brass, read the reports. So after the first six weeks or so was when they said, "Okay, we don't want you to throw your curveball anymore." But everybody was just encouraging, and I took the good-natured stuff in stride.

One time we were in Hickory, Tennessee. Sometimes we stopped at gas stations for lunch. I had grabbed a gallon of water because it was 95 degrees out, and I took it out to the bullpen and started doing my laps, my pulls. I came back and took a huge chug of my water. I looked down, and there was a frog in there. Like, a big freaking frog. So I spit out all my water, and everyone was fucking laughing. I found out who did it. It was our pitching coach, and he was in full uniform watching the starter get ready for the game. So I just soaked him with all that water, and he had to go out there to the game in a wet uniform. So, it was fun. It definitely took some time to get used to the lifestyle, but I definitely soaked it in. I think that's when I got my first strike-out ball and different things like that; those are things that you're going to remember, like your first outing.

**Did you ever get into major conflicts with others, or was it mostly good-natured joking?**

The pitching coach I was talking about, Xavier Hernandez, actually lives in Houston, so my family knows him pretty well. In my first year, in 2003, he got pissed off at Elijah Dukes (the gangster from Miami), and he called him out on something that he wasn't doing professionally, and Elijah just snapped at him. This was in the clubhouse, so people were holding Elijah back, and people were holding Xavier back. And Xavier is the pitching coach, you know? In college and high school that's your teacher – and this guy's trying to fight him. This player, I think he was nineteen or twenty at the time, was a guy that got recruited to play linebacker at Miami, and he was a second rounder. I think he got like \$500,000, and he was just mean. He had gold grill and chains and he was just coming at this pitching coach. So that was pretty crazy, and I think that was my first brush with conflict in the clubhouse. Another time, during AA, happened in the hallway after a game. The

dugout goes up to the clubhouse, so it was the same hallway the umpires use. The umpires and the coaches were disputing a call after the game was over and they were both walking up the tunnel together, and an all shit-storm broke loose in that tunnel, because they weren't around the fans. The main thing is to always take care of it in the clubhouse or underneath the tunnel, so the fans don't see, I guess, besides bench-playing brawls and stuff. But those guys just started fighting I think.

It wasn't confirmed, but after that I think somebody landed a punch on an umpire in the hallway, and it was our hitting coach. This wasn't confirmed either, but he went to Mexico that summer to coach down there, so I think he was serving a suspension or something like that. They just told him to leave the Southern League and stay away from that umpire. So that was pretty wild. Other conflicts I can think of are when managers just go ballistic on an umpire and get tossed. Those are pretty fun.

Then there were some brawls. I actually hit somebody. I'm not super proud of it, but I did hit somebody. I think it was during my last year, or possibly 2009. I hit – do you remember... I don't remember his name actually. I don't think it was Jermaine Dye – it was somebody like that; an outfielder who played in the big leagues. Somebody asked me to hit him and so I drilled him. Somebody had drilled our second baseman who was also a big, huge, tall guy. But he didn't charge the mound because that second baseman, this huge dude, was right there behind me. All I learned (from Robin Ventura and Nolan Ryan in '93) is that you just stand on the mound, and position players. They're not used to running over the top of the mound. So Robin Ventura ran toward the mound, toward Nolan Ryan, and he tripped on the slope of the mound and his head fell down, and then Nolan Ryan just came in with the head lock and



just started beating the crap out of him. So that's what I always remember, and people have told me to not try to charge the hitter, to just stand on top of the mound. That gives everybody the most time to help you out, on your team, and then at the same time that slope is hard for them to negotiate if they're a position player and they've never pitched before. So I just stayed on the mound and he didn't charge, and everything was cool after that.

I do remember yelling, "Fuck you, Gary Carter!" The Mets' catcher was the manager for the Long Island Ducks. I was pitching and there was a runner on third with two outs, and it was a close game. Gary Carter was the manager for the other team, and he told the runner on third to steal. He tried to steal home and see if I would fall for it, because my back was to third base. So I just stepped off the mound and threw it to home and we got the guy out, but I was just so fired up. Gary Carter was crossing in front of me to go back to the dugout, and so I just pointed at him and yelled, "Fuck you, Gary Carter!" I just thought it was kind of underhanded that he would try to steal home behind my back, but I sat down in the dugout and I thought, "I just yelled 'fuck you' to a Hall-of-Famer. That's just crazy. I mean, things get heated, and people are super competitive you just kind of go with it. If somebody clears the benches, you have to go out there. There were some brawls that I wasn't involved in, but I had to go out there because my teammates were out there and I had to have their back, that kind of thing.

**How is each level of the Minor Leagues different than the one that precedes it? What changes from level to level?**

Things are faster I've noticed, and people are better. Everybody's better. There are not as many mistakes made,

there's not as many overthrown balls in the infield, the routine plays are made more frequently. Also, everybody in A-ball might have a couple errors a game for whatever reason, and then the errors just start to go away and the routine plays are just expected. The game's a little bit faster. The balls are hit harder, the ground balls are harder, the fly-balls are higher, all the breaking balls, the fastballs, everything's just a little bit better as you go up. I didn't really realize it at the time, how good we all were. It was like I said earlier about the competition; you're just kind of floating along with the competition that suits you. I played with Clayton Kershaw in AA. He was a pitcher for the Jacksonville Suns. A.J. Ellis, Kershaw, and James Loney, all played in that league, the southern league, and now I'm sitting back ten years later thinking, "Dang, all these guys are still playing. I didn't realize they were that good."

**As a Minor League player, describe your experience traveling for road games. For example, what are the hotels and food like?**

I would say the hotels are pretty crappy in A-ball. They're places like the Days Inn and there are two beds to a room so you get to know your roommate really well; whether he likes to sleep with the TV on and things like that. Pretty much, you go out to eat together and go everywhere together. We'd have to walk, like in Jackson, Mississippi, when it's 100 degrees out in July. We'd have to walk to go find something to eat, walk back to the hotel, and then catch the bus. One of my first months there in Charleston, we had played, so this was our off-day for travel, and we played a 7:00 game in Charleston, South Carolina, we got on the bus at 11:00 at night, and then we drove all the way to Charleston, West Virginia, which was a 12-hour drive. We got there at like 10:00 or 11:00 in the morning, and then we all fell asleep. I think we played a game that next

day or that was our day off and then we practiced, I don't know, but some of those bus rides are crazy. You have all these guys sleeping, sprawled out all over the bus, and you have to climb on top of the seats to get to the bathroom. Also there are all kinds of crazy movies that people watch, and the bus drivers sometimes get lost. It would be 10:55, McDonalds closes at 11:00, and we'd order thirty hamburgers and stuff like that. We were starving. We were so hungry. Things weren't really set up to have people perform at their highest level. There was a lot of bad sleeping, shitty hotels, and terrible food. I mean, that's Minor League ball.

**What was your experience with roommates like; did you ever have a really terrible roommate?**

I didn't really have a terrible roommate. I got along with pretty much everybody. This wasn't really a terrible roommate situation, but I remember in Charleston, we were on the third floor of this white apartment building. It would be 10:00 - 11:00 at night when we were coming back from a game and the lights would be on all around the apartment complex. Charleston is really known for their Palmetto bugs, or their roaches, and they're enormous, so there'd be roaches covering the stairs, roaches all over the walls, roaches on the apartment door, and I'm scared of roaches. I mean, this was definitely breaking my fear of roaches. I had to get some sleep so I would just brush them off. Some people would have them as their as pets and stuff. That was a pretty terrible rooming situation to start off my career. Then I had good ones in Bakersfield - really I had all good ones. I pretty much lucked out, I would say, with roommates. They were basically just good friends. My first roommate on the road was Jason Hammel (he plays for the Cubs, the tall guy). He's a really good ping pong player, by the way. He's got this huge reach, and we'd room together

in Charleston on the road. He was just this little young guy. I think he played one year in junior college and he was a couple years younger than me. He was just this dorky kid from Seattle, Washington, and he really wasn't even that good. But these scouts, some of them can see how people are going to become later on in their career. I didn't even think he was going to make the Tampa Bay Rays, and now he is probably going to be a World Series winner this year.

**Was there ever a moment in your career where you wanted to quit and, if so, how did you overcome that?**

My birthday is at the end of May, so there's always that time period where I think, "Well, I'm a year older..." I'm always reassessing around that time, what my chances are, I guess; where I'm going and if I'm going to make it. Probably that first summer was hardest, because it was so long. I had played a collegiate wooden bat league the year before, in between my sophomore and junior years, which was around two months. However, this was 3 ½ to 4 months long in the summer. In the fall, I went to Instructional League in St. Petersburg, so it was a long time being away from home. For a lot of people, it takes time to get adjusted to always being on the road. Plus, you don't have a car. I didn't have a car in Charleston, and I didn't have a car in St. Petersburg. The instructs went all the way through the end of October, I want to say. It was probably six or seven months that I was gone without a car. That was kind of shitty because I thought, "Well is this always going to happen?" I had a girlfriend from college at the time, and I don't think I was super missing her, but it was just such a lifestyle adjustment for me to be away from family and friends like that, and only have baseball.

I guess I overcame that by taking a long off-season off. I was kind of burned out at that point, because I had gotten in

shape for a college season, and then we started that season on February 4<sup>th</sup> at Minute Maid park in Houston. I pitched from February all the way through (we didn't make it to Omaha), until around June. I played even after I got drafted. It seems like I got drafted in the middle of a week and then we played the super regionals, so it was just a long, long year of baseball, basically. A lot had happened. I just kind of overcame that by getting back in the gym, honestly, and then taking a break from pitching.

I never really thought about quitting, but I always thought, "Do I take a break? Do I play this off-season?" That was more the decision for me. I didn't really think about quitting, I thought more about keeping my passion for the game going by taking breaks when I needed to, and knowing when to do that for my body. You've got to take time to rest. I can't just pitch twelve months out of the year at a high level, you know? You've got to be able to come down and go up, and you've got to keep having the passion to compete. So that's what I would say, you've just got to know yourself, you know?

**Is it hard being in a relationship as a professional athlete?**

It's not easy bro. It's hard to meet people and get to know them, because others put that guard up. They're like, "Oh, you're a professional baseball player? You must be out for one thing and that's it, and then hit it and quit it. With the girlfriend thing, you're on the phone all the time. You're always begging people for phone chargers on the bus, so you can call your girl back or whatever. So that first summer I was away from home in Charleston playing, and then my girlfriend was out of the country in Costa Rica, and she was out for like two months or something. Our

relationship was kind of on-again, off-again, and so, we were always long distance.

Some people go in and they have a really good relationship that's really strong, and they get to go on the road sometimes, like to Charleston for a week or whatever. It's not easy. Some people have kids and so the mom and the kids stay home through the school year, and then when school's over and summer's in, they fly out and travel around with the player for a couple months. Once summer's over and school starts up, the mom and the kids go back to whatever hometown they're from. It's definitely not easy and it's a lot of late nights. When the game's over and you're ready to leave, you've got to wait for your player or your coach to shower, and eat, so you have weird hours, not regular hours. I would go to bed around 1:00 - 2:00 in the morning, sometimes 3:00, and get up around 11:00 - 12:00. It's just weird. It definitely puts a strain on you if you're not ready for it, or if you don't have a supportive partner.

**What was your lowest moment or greatest failure in professional baseball?**

There wasn't a whole lot on the field that was my lowest moment. Whatever happened between the lines, stayed between the lines. My thought was, "Whatever happens, happens". If I gave up two home runs that day, it was my job to push the reset button and be ready for the next day, no matter what. I wouldn't call a terrible outing my worst failure. I mean, I would probably say my worst failure would be not having more confidence in myself. That's a really weird thing to say, but I have seen so many people who only see what they cover on TV. Most of these guys are just like us, you and me talking. They are just regular people. So I would probably say I could've worked more

on that side of the game; more the mental side. As you go up, it's less about what you can do with the baseball, and more about what you believe you can do. I think I could've believed more that I deserved or belonged on that stage. I think a lot of players, including me, get in their head too much. So I think that was probably my biggest failure, just not believing in myself as much as others.

Some of these guys just seem to have that invincibility, or they're just really locked in, or their physical talent level is just way beyond everyone else. So out of ten games, I might've had five games where I was a Major League pitcher. That's kind of the comparison that people have told me. Out of the ten times you go out to pitch, half of those times you're a Major League-level pitcher, and the other half you stink it up for whatever reason. The food was bad, the travel was bad, or you slept wrong, or whatever. Like I said about the different levels as you go up, it's just that everybody is more consistently playing at a higher level. So you either have to believe you can do that, or you have to be able to make adjustments, or you have to be extremely talented physically. So I think players should keep working on the mental side, starting from when they're in high school, all the way through, staying positive, and believing that you can do it. Know that whatever happens on the field, a lot of it's just out of your control. I mean, you can just believe and have positive intentions and things like that, but a lot of what happens is just out of your control. A ball could bounce the wrong way, or somebody gets jammed and they get a hit, and it's a game of chance. Nobody's got it all figured out, otherwise you wouldn't have guys sign for \$50 million, and then get cut again a few years later. You just don't know. Many people don't understand how random it can be. Again, my regret is not owning it more, believing in myself that I could actually do this.

It's a step-by-step process, like in AAA where (I actually got in trouble for bragging about this) I jammed Bret Boone from the Mariners. He's a little short guy who played second base. He was in the steroid era in 2001-2002, and he had tons of home runs. So guys like Ryan Howard, a couple of benchmark players, Evan Longoria (when we would play inner squad), Delmon Young (another first-rounder); getting guys like that out, kind of builds the confidence. The main thing though, is just staying confident and believing in yourself, and whatever skills that you learn through doing that, they'll carry over to coaching, your work or job, or whatever you do after. Confidence is probably the biggest thing I can still improve on.

**After games in which you weren't at your best, how did you regain your composure?**

You just have amnesia. You just pretend it didn't happen. This goes back to the confidence thing. Guys like Delmon Young and BJ Upton (actually his name's Melvin Upton now, he played with me on that Charleston team), they just believe that they're going to get another opportunity and they're going to succeed. I remember when Delmon Young struck out, sometimes he would just laugh coming back to the dugout because he would say, "Yeah, I can't hit that today. Sorry." He was kind of impenetrable, just bulletproof. You don't think you're invincible, but sometimes when you do things and you didn't expect to, you feel that way. You just expect to feel that way again, and you expect that things will happen no matter what. You've got to forget about it, and you've got to believe that you are better than how you played today.

**What injuries have you dealt with throughout your professional career?**

I've been pretty lucky, because I didn't have a whole lot. I did have some bicep tendonitis when I first started in Charleston. I remember that on one of my first outings I was so jacked up. I went and grabbed some water from the cooler and my hand was shaking bad. I was trying to take a sip and my pitching coach looked at me like, "What is that? What's going on with you?" I told him I was just a little stressed, or whatever. So they had the trainer come over and look at it, and they said I had tendonitis. That was really a little thing that I always had to monitor. I always, always, always - and this goes for position players, too - always got my rotator cuff exercises in. I always did the weights and the bands and everything, but not heavy weights. When you do lighter weights, you actually have a chance for the rotator cuff muscles in there to strengthen. If you do heavier stuff, the delts and the biceps will kick in instead of those muscles. I always did the rice bucket, and always did the weights for the forearms to keep the elbow strong.

I did get drunk one time after a day game, and I broke my pinky toe on the doorframe.

I was stumbling around my apartment while we were grilling and I had drunk a bunch of beers. I stubbed my toe on the doorframe as I was walking through, or trying to walk through the door. The pinky toe on the very edge of my left foot broke. They actually put me on the disabled list for fifteen days. I was just so pissed off, because I was throwing bullpens, and I kept saying, "I'm fine!" but they needed me to be on the DL so that they could have the roster spot. I didn't get it fixed or anything like that, so it doesn't move like the other one does. They did do an x-ray on it and it was broken. But, like I said, I was throwing bullpens, I was fine, they just didn't want me to pitch.

Another injury was at the end of 2008, when I did have some stuff going on with my elbow. I didn't really know what it was, but it hurt enough, and I felt that I'd proved myself enough in AA to not have to push through an injury. So I got an MRI in late 2008 on my elbow and everything checked out good. I just had to shut it down for a couple months, or maybe six weeks, after the All Star break in 2008.

Another time in 2008 I was thinking about quitting, because I had started off the season in AAA, and then somebody got healthy in the big leagues, which "domino effected" me down to AA, and I'd already played AA for three and a half years. That was a time in that All Star break when I thought, "Do I really want to keep doing this or should I go back to school?" I just - I love the game. And it doesn't really matter. I talked to somebody this weekend about playing Minor League ball, and they said, "Did you hear about that lawsuit? Guys are trying to get paid because they feel like they got ripped off on their wages in the Minor Leagues." I said, "I don't really care." I don't even think I'm eligible for that. I think I'm too old or whatever, but I play the game because I love the game. If the love of the game is there, that's why these guys keep playing. There's no reason for Ichiro to keep going out there every day and getting hits unless he loves the game, because he's set. He's got all the money he wants. I would've probably played for - well, we basically didn't play for anything - the \$2,000/month or less just covered our expenses. So I just played because I loved it.

**Did being a professional baseball player change that love of the game at all?**

Yeah, because all of a sudden, it felt like everybody was out to get better for themselves, out to make money, so I

just listed things that aren't included with winning, which is weird. And as a college player, you're trained to be super competitive and try to win as a team no matter what. If that means being on the top step and being a cheerleader that day, as long as we win that's great. In pro ball though, it's more about how your stats look; how fast was I throwing...everybody wants to know what they've got on the radar gun. They come in and ask, "Oh, how fast was I? Did I light up the gun?" Meanwhile, they've given up six runs and lost the game for their team. They just care about their stats or they care about their stuff. They don't really care so much about the team element, so that kind of changed.

But the love of it...I still loved it and I loved going to all the little small towns, and the culture of the small towns. I think that was a lot of fun, going to those small towns. These are towns you would never go through, like Hickory, NC, Savannah, GA, Columbus, SC, Bakersfield, CA, and I just loved the culture of it. I was talking to my wife the other day about how cool it was, because every city was different; every place that we played was a little bit different, but in between the lines and the routine of the day, it was exactly the same. No matter where we were in the world, or in the country, at 5:00 the visiting team takes batting practice. At 4:00, that's home BP, and there's early work. Everything is pretty scheduled and regimented. So, it didn't really change my love for it, if anything it probably enhanced it because I was around guys that I had looked up to or had seen on TV. The guy right next to me might be making a million dollars and he's cool as shit, and I would just hang out and have fun with these really talented players. Everybody's really talented, so it was fun. I mean, I've got all those names that I've played with and against, and it's just great networking. And I'm talking to you,

because of this Facebook group that's online. It's pretty cool to be part of that group.

**Who is the most talented player you ever played with?**

There are a lot, because I played on this team in Venezuela in 2007, and that team had Marco Scutaro, Henry Blanco, Franklin Gutierrez, and oh - it fucking had Omar Vizquel! It's safe to say that Omar Vizquel is the most talented player I've played with. I also played with David Price, Evan Longoria, Jaime Shields, and I'm trying to think of who else... Henry Blanco is one of the best, because I remember him when he was with the Cubs. I don't know who he was playing with, but I got to throw to Henry Blanco in Venezuela, and that was a treat. He is amazing and such a good guy and a good catcher. That was probably one of the highlights of my pitching career, throwing to Henry Blanco. Omar Vizquel and Scutaro were talented players. Those are just off the top of my head. David Price is pretty good too. He's actually a really good hacky sack player. We played hacky sack all the time. I thought it was a really good warm-up for my hips and it got to where we'd run, then we'd play hacky sack and loosen up the hips, and then we'd play catch. We got him playing hacky sack in 2008 before we did the World Series run. So he and Longoria are probably some of the best current players.

**Was there a single moment in your career that you're most proud of; a highest moment?**

It was the first championship that I played in as a professional, and our team won. I always enjoy the last six weeks of the season when nobody really goes up or down and you're just playing together as a team. In 2006 we were a great team. We had Longoria on that team, Hammel, and a couple of other great players. I was thinking we had

Delmon Young, but he wasn't on that team. Anyway, I was the last pitcher, and there wasn't a save opportunity. I was the last pitcher on the mound and Montgomery had just gotten a team in 2004, so their team was only two years old. Before that they hadn't had a professional team there, since around the 80's or the 70's. This was game 3, the final game of the championship, the Southern League Championship, and the whole stadium was packed. It probably has a capacity of between eight and nine thousand. I was just so jacked up, it was the last inning, (I think it was like 12-4), it wasn't a closeout opportunity, but I was so pumped. I struck the first two guys out on six pitches and there were two outs, nobody on. We were up by about eight, and the stands just started to come alive. I mean, it was like everybody stood up, everybody was cheering. I just took a step off the mound, did a 360, or a 180, and I looked all the way around me. This huge crowd was just cheering. I got back up on the mound, threw a two-seam fastball, and the guy grounded the ball over to Longoria at third base – a two-hopper to Longoria – who threw it over to first. So we just chucked our gloves in the air and started mobbing on the mound. There was champagne in the clubhouse and people were doing tarp slides in there. I remember, and I still have pictures on my Facebook profile from the clubhouse when we won in 2006. We were just guys having a ball. That was the main thing, just celebrating with my teammates and things like that. That was probably the most memorable. I wouldn't say I got a save in that game, but I got to be the last guy on the mound when they mobbed everybody, and that was my first championship; a lot of guys' first championships. And that fall I went to the Arizona Fall League, which was only a one-game playoff, but we won so I got another ring there, and in 2007 I was the winning pitcher in the championship game in that same league. So I got three rings in a row, but that first one was probably the most memorable for me.

### **Have you ever done, or seen anyone do steroids?**

No, I've never done them, I've never seen them, but I played with guys that did them. I could name you at least five guys that did them. Now what they did, which was smart, was they did them in high school. They did them at a young age, and they started throwing 95. And then all of a sudden they got drafted in the second round, and they stopped taking steroids. Their velocity went down to 87, but they got the signing bonus. This one guy got around \$600,000 or something in the second round and he was a short, right-handed pitcher from North Carolina. He threw 94-96 all through high school, then he went to pro ball throwing 87-88, but he got paid. I know two guys like that.

Another guy had gotten released, and he wasn't really the smartest guy. He didn't think he'd have much of a future doing anything else, so he was in this league in Texas, somewhere near the Rio Grande valley, a semi-pro kind of league; it might be the Pecos League or something like that. Anyway, you can go down to Mexico and get pretty much whatever you want. So he did that and he was kind of nervous about it, but his velocity went straight up and he started throwing 94-95 with a good split, and he got picked up by the Rays (and I played with him in AA). So I knew it was around and I did think that those high school kids were kind of smart. Although this one dude was prematurely balding and he had a heart palpitation, because I think he just did too much. I think he did HGH, too, because his head was all weird, but he was almost a millionaire, so I guess you just get to see what people from different socio-economic backgrounds decide to do, what they think is worth it. Those are smaller town type of people. I came from a bigger town. I was also around when a lot of those birth certificates started coming out in 2003 and 2004, when a lot of people from the Dominican had to change

their names, because, all of a sudden, “Oh, they’re 16, not 24,” things like that. So I was definitely around it and I definitely knew. I feel like it was prevalent in the big leagues, and I feel like a lot of people got bottlenecked because of that; because it wasn’t really a level playing field. I don’t know who can blame them when they were just throwing money out there, like millions of dollars. They thought, “What’s one steroid shot? What’s one HGH shot? I’m going to do something to protect my family,” or however they rationalized it. I never had the opportunity to do it, and I never wanted to. Number one, I felt like it would mess up my body long-term, like these football players and their CT stuff, their head stuff. I just never wanted to do anything to affect the long term health of my body. And number two, I didn’t want to cheat. If that was the way I was going to do it, it would’ve felt empty to me; it would’ve felt like an empty victory to do it with steroids.

**How severely do you think that steroid users should be punished?**

It’s hard to say. I don’t think a lot of punishment really needs to happen, because I think it all went back to the ’94 strike. I was twelve then, and the ’94 strike happened midway through the season. I had to ask my dad, “Is there going to be baseball when I have the opportunity to play? Can I still…” because I thought they were not going to play anymore. But they sat out the whole season and the Players Union got all these concessions, or whatever, and one of them was the drug testing stuff.

If you want to get into it, it’s like – guys on the 40-man (I think this is still true today), they only get tested for performance enhancing drugs, because, and this might have changed, but when I was playing, if you were on the 40-man you could smoke weed, take cocaine, do whatever you

wanted to do. If you weren’t on the 40-man, but you were on the same team, you were tested for all those substances. It wasn’t really cool, because you had one guy that wanted to smoke pot with his buddy, but his buddy was on the 40-man, so he could do whatever he wanted to. The other guy had to wait for the tests though. As for how severely they should be punished, my first take was “don’t hate the player, hate the game.” They’re taking advantage of the system. I have more of an issue with how Barry Bonds and the achievements of that era get treated, as far as getting into the Hall of Fame or not. I don’t know how severely they should be punished, but I didn’t really like what Ryan Braun did. He had a testosterone test and he was way over. I mean, I feel like they have a good control on it right now, honestly. You know, whacking guys pretty hardcore if they do something wrong or if they get caught, but that whole era is just so murky from, around ’98 to 2004-2006. It took them a whole decade, really, to get it all cleaned up.

**Do you think guys like Bonds, McGuire, and Sosa should be in the Hall of Fame?**

I don’t feel like it’s my call to make. I just think it’s kind of like the Black Sox thing; that whole Sosa/McGuire thing made everyone so passionate about it, and everyone was so excited because it was so quickly after the strike had happened that nobody really cared. They did a lot to bring back the passion for and interest in the game nationally. It just got taken way out of hand. I mean, Bonds, McGuire, and Sosa, you can’t consider them on par with Henry Aaron and Babe Ruth – you just can’t. I do feel like they might make it. Some people argue for Bonds, because he had a better career, or he had a Hall of Fame career *before* he started doing it. Would these guys have had that? If you start looking at their career before they started taking steroids, are their stats enough to get them into the Hall of



Fame? If so, then I would say, okay, yeah. But it's kind of like you're rewarding somebody who really took advantage of something that happened because of a strike. Again, it's not really up to me to decide, but I would probably try to take their steroid stats out of the equation and then judge them against Henry Aaron and Babe Ruth and whatever.

Some people argued that some of the pitchers were doing it too, like Mike Hampton for the Astros, Kevin Brown for the Yankees. You know, he was a stud for the Padres for a while; pretty sure he did them. So, it helped both pitchers and hitters but I don't think everybody was taking them, just a select few. If everybody was doing it then there would be more of a level playing field. It needed to get cleaned up, and I'm glad it did, but I think it's going to take some looking at their stats before steroids to decide if they're going to make it.

**Do you have any baseball superstitions?**

It's pretty hard to say. We had some crazy ones in college, like two outs, two strikes, two balls... Deuces are Wild; that stuff. I don't know if you guys still do that. I never really had any super consistent superstitions. I was very particular about my locker. I was more of a neat freak on my locker but nothing consistent.

**Do you play fantasy baseball?**

No, I have no interest. I think it's just too much to keep up with. I didn't watch baseball for maybe a year and a half after I stopped playing, because I didn't watch any of 2010 last half and then I didn't watch any of 2011. I just watch the Astros and the Rangers right now, because I just watch whoever is on TV, if it's a good game or not. And usually

within 5 minutes I've found somebody that I played with or against, so that's cool.

**What's your favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional baseball player?**

I think my favorite thing was the lifestyle. It's so unique. I met this kid in Montgomery who came to almost every game, and his dad took a picture of us, me and this kid. He would just talk to us during the games. He wasn't asking for a ball or anything. That's why we kind of liked him, because he wasn't always asking for a ball. So his dad took a picture of us, and then I came back the next year, and for his birthday his dad had me sign the photo and then they printed the photo on a cake for his birthday. It was cool how this kid looked up to all of us, and I thought how it's a unique position. You can impact a lot of people's lives with something random like that. Maybe you go to a hospital and you see kids and you try to cheer them up, so that platform for people, I think, is pretty cool.

People think that since you're a professional at baseball, that means you must know how to teach it, or they want to hear stories, or listen to what you have to say. I think that was probably my favorite part, the lifestyle, and having a baseball card and being in these unique situations that are just so much fun. Some of it is kind of like the feeling of being on a rollercoaster and then getting off, when you think, "Oh my god, that was such an amazing ride." And that was every outing for me. Every time I played on the field I thought, "Wow, I can't believe that happened!" or, "That was so amazing!" I got to see all these people making amazing plays, and every night, even if I wasn't playing, I got a seat in the house. I got to choose seats and bullshit with my friends, look at girls in the stands, and cheer along with whatever race (like the hot dog race)

they're doing, or whatever. It was just sort of this alternate universe that we were in – that I was in for seven years, and some people don't ever get out; some people, they stay in forever. They're called lifers, and those guys are like 70-75-year-old dudes, hobbling around in Hickory, NC trying to get on a bus and sleep in shitty hotels, and they love it. They don't ever want to leave it.

The worst part - it was probably partly the best and the worst, because the worst was the travel. I mean, I was never in a place for longer than four or five days. I was always somewhere, traveling somewhere. You couldn't really make friends outside of your team, and once your team got changed up you had to make new friends. Once the team and the season were over you had to go back home and find a job or a place to stay. You know, that constant moving was cool, because you got to see all these new places and meet different people randomly, but you never had anything lasting. I never really felt like I lived somewhere. I was from Houston and I'm still kind of from Houston, but I never felt like I lived there when I was playing baseball. I just threw my stuff down at my parents' house and figured out what I was going to do every off-season. The traveling was kind of abrupt and then, all of a sudden, BOOM, you're gone again; you're on your own for a few months before the team gets back together next year. So that's probably the worst thing, the travel.

**What are you doing now? Are you still involved with baseball at all?**

I'm not at the moment. Sometimes this little league that's close by where I live now in Austin asks me to come out and work with a pitcher or two. I've done talks here and there. I've done a lot of talks about getting cut my freshman year in high school, because it's good for that age group of

6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders. I've done some select league stuff and I've done some lessons, but nothing full time. Some people are built to be coaches, and I'm not really one of those guys. I mean, I'll hit fungos for you all day long. I'll throw batting practice or whatever, but I'm not a disciplinarian, so I'm not a coach. I just can't get into that role too much, but I do love the game and I love to be around it whenever I can, but nothing super organized or structured.

**If you could go back in time, what would you tell yourself as you were starting your career?**

I'd say to take more pictures and write more things down. As I'm talking to you, I'm starting to remember things, but every one of us that have gone through even one season or a month of pro ball can tell so many stories out of that. There's so much that goes on behind-the-scenes that people don't know about and it's just a unique perspective. So I would probably just want to take more pictures with guys that I wanted to keep in touch with. I would want to do a better job of keeping in touch with people to help me, help my older self to remember what actually happened.

# CHAPTER 3

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## CHANTZ MACK

Drafted: 2013 by Seattle Mariners (29<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: AAA

**What is your earliest baseball memory?**

Man, that must be little league. I was five or six years old playing at this park called Kendall Boys and Girls Club. I remember pitching in that game and also hitting three home runs. Those were the days.

**Were you interested in baseball throughout your childhood?**

Yeah, I've been playing baseball since I was five. When I went to high school, I didn't play it 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, or 11<sup>th</sup> grades, but then I picked it back up my senior year. My dad asked me to play again, because he always thought that sports were my best bet. So I said, "Yeah why not, I'll play again," and it worked out for me.

**When did scouting begin for you?**

In my senior year I was scouted by the Mets and the Red Sox, and I had that pre-draft workout with those guys, but I tore my hamstring. I was out for two months. I couldn't really do anything for them, so I didn't get drafted out of high school.

**How was college baseball different than high school baseball?**

College baseball is a lot more structured, a lot tougher competition, and everyone is way better. I went to the University of Miami, so I was in probably the toughest league in college sports for baseball, the ACC, where you're dealing with a lot of potential first-rounders, second-rounders, and just a lot of talented guys. There were All-Americans and high school All-Americans. So it's a lot tougher and in college everybody travels. We flew on

airplanes, we pretty much had a big league field, a locker room, and the food we ate was better, so it was just a huge step up.

**What did it feel like to be drafted?**

It was surreal, man. I didn't really have control of anything, and I was just freaking out. I was super excited. I mean, it was my senior year in college so it was my last chance, and it worked out, so I'm just extremely excited and happy.

**Do you remember what your first day of professional baseball was like?**

Yes, the first day was in Arizona. It was probably around 118 degrees, and I was like, "Wow, what am I doing here?" It was very hot. It was different, because I was used to garbage. We had our equipment guy, and he'd just give us whatever bat we wanted, whatever cleats, whatever batting gloves, gloves, and I went through the college clubbies. In pro ball I went to the clubbie here and he said, "You're A's, I have to give you everything," so I was like, woah, caught off guard.

No one was able to practice the first two days, because you have to go through physicals and stuff. I remember the physicals in college took like fifteen minutes, but in pro ball it took 2 days, because they are testing everything, so I thought, "Wow, this is official."

**How were you treated when you were new to the league; were you hazed at all?**

It was very smooth. I probably only knew one person on the team in Rookie ball in Arizona, but it was cool.

Everyone was new, so there wasn't really any hazing. It wasn't bad.

**As you've continued your career, compare the levels of the minors; what's better, what's worse, what's different?**

As you go up in the levels you notice the pitches. They are all speed pitches like the curveballs, changeups, sliders. They are all better as you go up. You have more control, they break more, sink more, or cut more. Initially, there are a lot more fastballs; they're harder. Every team's bullpen is harder as you go up. We had a guy throw a 95 mph in Rookie ball in Low-A. In High-A you have teams where the entire bullpen is throwing 95-100 mph fastballs so that's way different. The strike zone gets a little bit smaller as you go up, so the pitches have to go more in-strike, so in that aspect I think it's a little bit better for hitters, but at the same time, the balls are moving more and coming in a lot more firmly, so that makes it hard. It's just a tough game. They have more scouting reports on you, so they know all your weaknesses, all your strengths, and once a team finds your weakness, they just pound on that and just try to exploit it. Coaches are a lot more lax with players as you go up; it really feels more like a pro atmosphere. They pretty much put a bat in your hands and let you do what you have to do to get good and to the Major Leagues.

**What has your experience been like traveling for road games? What are the hotels like, what is the food like, what is that lifestyle like?**

Coming up in Short Season A-ball in Everett, and Low-A in Clinton, the road travels are pretty bad; motels and truck stop areas and places like that. I thought it was pretty bad. When we traveled, you had your two-hour bus rides, you

had your five-hour bus rides, and on one trip in Short Season we had a ten-hour bus ride to Idaho. I was in AA a little bit and we had an eleven-hour bus ride from the next bus. So they were tough, the bus rides and whatnot, trying to find things to do. But it depends on the condition, because in the California League, for example, the furthest drive is four hours. In AA, the furthest bus is twelve-hours, Short Season A is 10 hours. So based on the league, the hotels get better as you go up. In AA the hotels are much, much better. The food is much better in AA and AAA. High-A is a little bit better than Low-A, and Low-A is a little bit better than Short Season A. So as you go up you get treated a little bit better with everything.

**Tell me about your experiences with roommates so far; have you ever had a bad roommate or have they been pretty good?**

All my roommates have been fine. You get to choose, so you're not going to choose someone that you're not friends with or that you don't trust. Yeah, roommates are good – perfect.

**How do you, personally, regain your composure when you're off your game or in a slump?**

That's a tough one. You've got to figure out a way to just forget about it once you leave the stadium. I try to tell myself it's just a game... at the end of the day it's a game that I'm getting paid for. There are millions and millions of other people that would love to be in my shoes, so I don't take it for granted, but I know that it's a sport; you're going to fail. If you fail seven out of ten times, you're a Hall-of-Famer in baseball. So you've just got to take the failure, not accept it, but deal with it, and you just have to know that you're going to have some good times and you're going to

have a lot more bad times. You have to stay even-keeled, stay humble, and just keep moving forward. Keep moving forward, keep adjusting with the game, and keep adjusting with how they're pitching to you. If you fail while hitting – if you sit out or strike out or get complacent, you can't take it out onto the field, because on the field you're playing defense. It's another aspect of the game, and you've got to help your team that way. So, I try to separate everything and keep moving forward. I try to keep reminding myself that it's just a game.

**What were your goals when you started your professional career and how have they changed from that moment until now?**

Well, the main goal was to make it to the Major Leagues. Other goals were to hit .300 every year or to move up a level every year. They have changed now; I still want to make the Major Leagues, but as far as the other goals, like hitting .300 and moving up a level every year, you realize at a certain point that you can't control that. You can't control where you play or at what level they put you, even though they say you do. You can't control hitting .300. You can control hitting seven out of ten balls hard. You can control hitting eight out of ten balls hard, but you can't control when you hit the ball hard, if it's going to go into a gap where it'll go for a home run or if it's going to drop. It's baseball man, you can hit ten balls hard in a row and they might go right to the people or right to the defenders. So it helps to change from trying to hit .300, to trying to hit seven balls hard out of ten.

**What are the highest and lowest moments of your career so far?**

The highest was easily this year at Lancaster when I hit for the cycle. It's a huge accomplishment because it's so rare. The lowest moment was when, I guess in Low-A, I struck out like four or five times. We had a double-header, and I struck out five or six times that day, and I told them the sun did it to me.

**Who was your favorite baseball player growing up?**

That is easily Ken Griffey Jr. He's the man.

**Has playing professional baseball changed your perception of the sport at all?**

I guess it has. Now I think professional baseball is a lot more of a business; a lot of moving parts, a lot of things you can't control. Like I said, they invest a lot of money into some guys, but some guys they don't. We see some guys get more opportunities than others, because of the investment that the teams have in them. The work that you have to put in is very disciplined and you have to put a lot of work in. It's actually a lot more work than people think. You're at the field 10-12 hours a day and people don't know that. People don't know about the bus rides and how long and hot they are. There's no flying places until you're in AAA. The food is terrible. For example, on the road you'll finish a game at 11:00-12:00, and the only thing open is McDonalds or Taco Bell or whatever, so that's always tough also. You actually have to go through it to understand what a Minor Leaguer is going to go through. Living situations are five people in a two-bedroom, all on air mattresses, and it's tough, man. It's tough.

**Have you gotten in any major conflicts with players or coaches throughout your career?**

Nah, I'm always the guy that everyone loves.

**What is your favorite hobby, other than baseball; what do you do when you're not playing ball?**

I love to just hang out and chill. Whether it's at the beach or at the pool, it doesn't matter. I just like to hang out and relax. I like bowling, video games - *Call of Duty*. I love watching college football, and I love eating, that's about it.

**Have you seen any of your fellow teammates doing steroids?**

No, I haven't.

**As a professional player, does it frustrate you to know that players are cheating when you're working so hard at the same game?**

Yeah, I don't really think it's fair. I think they're trying their best to stop all the cheating and whatnot. I know they do random drug tests all the time, blood tests, urine tests, I mean, they're trying their best to combat all that cheating. But, I mean, some guys do it. I don't believe in it, I don't condone it, but it is what it is. I just have to work that much harder, that's what I tell myself.

**Do you have any baseball superstitions?**

No, not really, but I do have a routine where I have to hit off the tee and then hit front. This is in the cages before I hit batting practice. I don't have to wear a specific underwear or socks or anything like that, no.

**What is your favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional baseball player?**

My favorite thing is that I am getting paid to play a game. My least favorite thing is being away from home for 6-7 months, because I'm away from family, friends, and my girlfriend.

**Has being a professional baseball player affected your love of the game at all?**

No, it hasn't. It's fun, man. It's something I love and something I always wanted to do, so I just love it.

**If you could go back in time, what would you tell yourself as you were starting your career?**

That's a good question. I would tell myself to just enjoy it. Enjoy every day of the game, because it's tough, it's hard, and it's a stressful game. In the beginning, I would get pretty upset when I would get out and not get a hit that day or something like that, but now I've learned that you've just got to enjoy it. Take each day, day-by-day, each game pitch-by-pitch, and just enjoy it. Just have fun – it's literally just a game. Just have fun.

# CHAPTER 4

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## ELLIOT JOHNSON

Signed: 2002 by Tampa Bay Devil Rays (Free Agent)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: MLB



**What is your earliest baseball memory?**

The earliest baseball memories I have would be playing tee-ball.

**Were you always interested in baseball?**

It's actually much deeper than that; it stretches a lot farther than that for me. It's a generational thing. My grandfather was introduced to the Cubs when he was a kid, and then he introduced that to my dad, who wanted to play professionally, didn't get the opportunity to do so, or wasn't good enough to do so. So he kind of made it his goal and mission in life that my brothers and I would play in the big leagues for the Cubs, and you know, out of the four of us, three of us got drafted. I didn't get drafted, but I was the only one to play in the big leagues. My younger brother Leon played for the Cubs' Minor League system for a little while.

**What are the differences between high school baseball and professional ball?**

One difference is obviously the ability level, the difficulty, how much better everybody else is, and how much more intensity there is. I could go on and on and on. I mean, the differences are night and day. Everything is different about it. There isn't anything really similar other than the game that you're playing and the dimensions of the mound, the plate, and in between the bases. Everything else is going to be different though.

**What did it feel like to sign with the Rays? What was that moment like?**

It was a dream come true, because I wasn't drafted, and the drafts come and go, and this was 2002 so we had a computer with dial-up at the time so it's not like you had your smart phone. So I just assumed I wasn't good enough to play, when in reality, the fact was that if you went back to that draft class, you'd find that shortstops throwing 93 that could run a 6.4/60 and switch hit, didn't exist. I would have been the only one. So, in terms of ability level, if I could have been up against everyone else, I would have certainly been considered to be somewhere in there, and even my scout told me I probably would have been a first-round pick if I had waited and gone into the draft the next year. But ultimately my family and I decided that we weren't going to wait, because my older brother had been drafted previously and he was on this draft-and-follow type of thing; that's what they used to call it then. Before they changed the cut-off dates, they used to do a draft-and-follow, but when they followed him they didn't feel like he was going to be a Major League prospect, so they didn't draft him the following year, or offer him a deal. So my mind was made up that I was going to go play.

**Do you remember what your first day of professional baseball was like?**

Yeah, I remember, I remember it really well. We went on a road trip and I almost missed the bus. We went to Burlington, North Carolina from Princeton, West Virginia. Actually, I didn't even know how the Laundry Loops worked. I didn't even know how to put the socks in so I just threw them in the thing, you know. Being in Rookie ball, it's not like the clubbies are there to take care of you, so no one helped me get any socks out. So when I went onto the field, I just had my ankle socks, my white ankle socks, and I didn't have the blue tube socks that everyone else had. So obviously that was a problem in terms of the uniform. It

ended up that somebody gave me an extra pair or something like that, and then I had to go to the store and buy a new pair the next day. I do remember getting a hit, an infield single on my first at-bat, a broken bat. It was a little ground ball past the pitcher, and I beat it out for a hit my first at-bat.

**How were you treated when you were new to the minors? Were you hazed at all or was it a smooth transition?**

I would say there's plenty of hazing, which is going to happen. When you think about it, I'm a small-town kid and, I didn't really know what I was getting into. You've got all these guys that have been in pro ball for a while, so naturally when you're first out of the draft everybody will ask you what round you got drafted in, and basically what all the players are doing is effectively establishing a hierarchy. So if you got taken before somebody else, you are essentially better than them, or you're 30-picks better than them. That's kind of the way that everybody looks at it, in terms of not only ability but in terms of prospect status and money. There are a lot of layers to that but that's ultimately what it boils down to. Guys are trying to establish a hierarchy since I was a free agent out of high school, which is quite an anomaly, I was, I suppose, discarded or not really in the "in crowd," even though my ability and my playing skills were certainly up to par.

**What were your goals when you started your professional career, and how did they change as you progressed through the minors?**

I think everyone is just trying to get to the big leagues. That's all you're trying to do. While you're there, you're trying to get a hit every time at-bat. You're trying to make

every play you can. Ultimately, you're just trying to get to the big leagues. After that, what might happen is, if you have rivalries on a team, or, with a team, you're trying to win or go to the playoffs. Maybe you're just trying to make sure you hit better than somebody else on the team, you know, so you can get them to stop running their mouth, or whatever it is. You can come up with little things to motivate you in the middle, but the end goal is always to play in the big leagues.

**In your experience, how is each level different than the one that precedes it? Like Rookie ball, A, AA, AAA, Major League ball; what changes from level to level?**

It just depends. In Rookie ball you end up with a ton of Latin American players, because they're really, really cheap and easy to get. So half of the team will be Latin American guys. It's a low-risk, high-reward type of situation for the teams. If you look at Salvador Perez with the Royals, they didn't sign him for hardly anything, and he is one of the best players in the game every single year. He signed a bad deal, so the return investment for him is incredible.

Rookie ball has a lot of guys that are fresh out of the draft, getting acclimated to the game, learning how to play the game at a professional level. There are a lot of things that happen that you would probably shake your head at if you understand the game, where guys are trying to learn how to play the game professionally. You know, we even had a guy who was trying to play baseball professionally and play football at LSU at the same time. He didn't even understand the rules. He went up there, and they told him to try and bunt for a hit. He tried to bunt with two strikes and fouled it off, so he struck out. You and I know, but he didn't know that. You take those types of things for

granted, that some of these people are out here simply because they're super talented, but not because they know what they're doing.

From there you've got the Short Season Rookie ball league. It's kind of the same thing where you get guys out of the draft, but they're more college-aged guys or Latin American guys who have proven they can handle that competition. When you get to A-ball you're talking about guys that are either fresh out of the draft, college-type guys or guys that are progressing through and ready for another challenge, where the season is a little bit longer if their body can hold up. Then when you get to High-A there is a lot more offbeat-type pitching where guys are getting to the point where they can throw – of course they can throw a fastball for a strike – but then they can start throwing their off-speed stuff for a strike too. The curve gets a little bit higher there.

In AA you have guys on every team that are big league players every single day. It's just that there are only a couple of them. When you get to AAA, you're talking about guys that are big league-ready who are just waiting for their turn. Or there are guys that are depth-players that, in case of an injury, they're ready to step in. You've got guys that are there, because they're trying to manipulate their service time so that they can pay them less in the free agency, and hold onto the rights for one more year. And then you've got guys that are just filling in and playing catch with the guys that are there on the team to obviously help the big league team.

**In your experience as a Minor League player, what was the travel like? What were the hotels like? What was the food like? What was that lifestyle of being on the road like?**

It sucks, it's awful. Understand, they really don't care about the players whatsoever. You know, they're ultimately trying to make as much money as they possibly can. Buses break down, they don't have air conditioning (which is a regularity), but nobody is held accountable for it. The teams, the affiliates, are the ones that do that, and of course they're trying to get people from wherever it is, to wherever it is, at a bare minimum expense. They take risks all the time and the people that have to suffer are the players, and they don't care, because they're not on the bus. Ultimately they just penny pinch as much as they can to make money. I get it, it's a business, but if they were on the bus and they had to endure those conditions, I'm sure it would be a much different conversation. They wouldn't be as willing to endure those types of conditions.

The food is rough. Usually at the lower levels they have to make sure that they have places within walking distance. There would be Waffle House for dinner every night and for breakfast, and then a Subway for lunch. That's kind of the way it works. When you get up to the higher levels there are better opportunities. You're making a little bit more money so obviously, you have it better. When I was down there, there wasn't a whole lot of Uber, but a lot of times you were stuck with what you could get to within walking distance. The options aren't really extravagant... you get a couple of things, but it's much better at the higher levels because you're talking about bigger cities than if you're talking about Princeton, West Virginia and Rookie ball.

**From an outsider's perspective, they don't pay you anything in Minor League ball and they take you to crappy hotels and give you bad food – so do you think it's just the love of the game that motivates the players to stick with it?**

Of course. That's all it is. They're fighting litigation right now. There's a lawsuit going on, because they know they're paying less than minimum wage; there's no debate. You know, they're trying to claim that they are seasonal employees, which is garbage. They own your rights for what, six years? How is that a seasonal employee, when the contract states that you're an employee of that team for six years? That's not a seasonal thing, that's a yearly thing. In fact, that's closer to a decade than it isn't. I have a problem with that, and I think obviously you're talking about owners who don't want to pay those guys anything, because honestly they're not getting the return on the investment from a ticket sales standpoint. They're manipulating the way that it is, and the union doesn't do anything because they've got a loose affiliation with the players there, because they say that you're not a member of the union. Therefore, they don't want to handle that type of stuff when they know, ultimately, they could do something about it. They just choose not to.

Obviously players that are entering the draft every year are subject to collective bargaining, but they don't want to have anything to do with it when it comes to the salaries. They get to pick and choose when they want to get involved and when they don't. They've just chosen to stay out of that one. It's a two-fold problem. The Player's Association could step in and do something if they wanted to, but they decided not to on that particular front. So they say that every player is going to enter the draft, obviously not the Latin American guys, but all the American guys are going to enter the draft and ultimately, that's how they get their way into the big leagues. Well, every one of them is going to play in the Minor Leagues, so they can't have it both ways even though they claim to do so. It's a two-part problem, but the owners are certainly taking advantage of the situation. They're obviously happy with the way things

are, making money all over the place, and obviously they don't have to disclose it, but they're making way more money than they claim to be.

**What has your experience been like with roommates coming up through the leagues? Have you had any bad ones?**

Of course, of course. Roommates are tough, man. You want to try and get on the same program as best you can, so you've got to get the good ones early. Ideally, you want to get guys that have a vehicle, so they're kind of on their own program so you don't have to babysit them as much and they can kind of do their own thing. You know, that's obviously more ideal but that type of stuff is expensive, you know, shipping your car back and forth, and guys will get sent up and down. It presents a lot of problems. I had a roommate my very first year who got hurt, so he had to go back to the facility in Florida. So when they brought up another guy, he didn't want to room with me. He wound up going with one of his buddies that he'd known from a previous league, which was understandable, but I ended up getting stuck with the rent bill. It's tough when your rent is \$500 and you're bringing in \$600. Things were a little bit challenging, but I made it through.

Also, I ended up getting a Latin American roommate, and the language barrier was a problem. It was just problematic, obviously. I learned a lot from that experience. More than anything, I learned that I need to speak better Spanish, because I've taken plenty of it in high school. Ultimately, my Spanish isn't fluent, but it's much better because of that, especially when it comes to business like that. When it comes to leases and deposits and things like that you don't need to be necessarily subsidizing their stay but that's kind of what happens.

It's fine, I get it at this point, but picking a roommate is tough because you're going to get guys that fall into categories like workout junkies, lazy junkies, and party junkies. Usually you fall into one of those three categories when it comes to ball players. You just want to mesh with whoever it is. Plenty of the best players in the game that you're watching on TV every single day are extremely lazy. They'll sleep until 2:00 when it's time to go to the field, eat something, and then go get 'em. They'll go three for four that night and do it again the next day. It's amazing. And you'll see plenty of guys who stay up until 3:00-4:00 in the morning every single night, and then roll into the field around 2:00-3:00, and then go three for four that night and do it again the next day. It's impressive.

Then you get the guys that workout nonstop. I know that everyone has their thing. They choose what works for them and they go with it. But obviously you generally only hear about the guys that work hard. There are plenty of guys who usually fall into those three categories. It's not just the Minor Leagues; it's the big leagues too.

**Into which category do you think you fell when you were a ball player?**

It just depended on the year, the time of the year, and on how good I was playing. I'd say I ranged into any of the three. Obviously, early in the year you're trying to maintain your body as best as you can, but I promise you toward the end of the year most guys fall under the lazy category. You know, when you try and get out of slumps, you try and do anything you can, so I'd say I probably ranged into any of the three at any point in time. Early in the year I was usually workout-junkie-style into the All-Star break, and then guys start trying to find things to get them out of a funk if they're in one. You start trying to change up your

routine even though you may not necessarily need to, but you've got to do something different to try to get some hits, and so you start doing things a little bit differently.

Obviously once the season starts wearing you down, I don't want to say there's *no way*, but every single workout junkie starts working out less. It's just the way it is. When you start getting into August and September, those guys aren't in the gym every single day, or they're just doing less.

**When you're in a slump, what helps you regain your composure?**

It's borderline on obsessive for me, just because if I was struggling, I didn't have room for anything else in my life, just because I wasn't hitting the way that I thought I should be. I would do so much video work honestly, and study the pitcher for the next day all I could, to make sure that I was as prepared as possible in terms of watching my swing and making sure I was where I was supposed to be timing-wise, hands-wise, stride-wise, you know, everything. I would just make sure that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing on that particular day, and then, make sure I didn't do it the next day, and then, make sure I was as prepared as possible for the pitcher the next day.

Those were the kinds of things that I would do a lot. I would probably end up doing more, and then I'd find out that that doesn't always work, and then it ends up becoming counter-productive, because you end up thinking your way into a deeper hole. That's kind of the way that it worked for me. Then I would end up dialing back from there, and the next thing you know I would pull out of it, or find that it was something as simple as changing my bat model. That would give me confidence, and then going into the next day I would get three hits or whatever it was. It

was nonsensical. I mean, really there was no right or wrong answer. All that really matters is the result; it doesn't matter what you do, you just need to find that result. So you end up trying a bunch of different other things, and you could end up trying different places to eat thinking that's going to pull you out, I mean, it's not going to. But, if you think it's going to help, then it helps, and if you don't think it's going to then it's not. I mean, really it is all between the ears.

**Throughout your career, was there ever a moment that you wanted to quit, and if so, how did you overcome that?**

Yes, you want to quit all the time when you're dealing with failure at such a high rate. I mean think about it, if you're finding success three out of ten times then you're a multi-millionaire. So most guys fall into the category between two and three. We're talking about fractions here. There are plenty of times when you have a really, really rough stretch and you think, "Why, why am I dealing with this? Why?" But in reality this was the only thing that I knew. I mean, baseball was all that I knew; it was all I knew how to do, it was all I knew I wanted to do, and so I just made sure I kept on grinding and found a way through it.

I think you end up becoming mentally tough, and I don't think people understand how mentally tough that this game is, because you're talking about the best people in the world. At any given time, there are 750 ball players at the Major League level that are active. We're talking about, literally, one in hundreds of millions of types of special people. These are people that are incredibly talented, incredibly gifted, incredibly hard-working, and incredibly mentally tough, because of the grind. You can do everything right. You can hit the ball as hard as you

possibly can, and some really fast person, or some really, really good player is going to make a play on you, and just wash that away. You could take an 0-4 day, when in reality you hit balls as well as you could.

So really you just have to be mentally tough to understand that it's a process and you have to trust the process, whereas, if you hit the ball hard, you did your job. Maybe not statistically, but you did do your job overall. What the frustrating part is, when people that you're in competition with are not hitting the ball hard but are finding success statistically and they end up finding their way into the big leagues longer than they should be or instead of you. So that becomes challenging mentally as well, which is another whole discussion.

**What was it like for you when you got called up to the big leagues?**

It was like a dream come true, man. I had a miserable 2007, I was coming off of a surgery on my stomach, and I was trying to regain that abdominal strength. Obviously the rotation strength is more important in hitting than with anything else really. I was having a tough time coming back from that, so I worked hard in the off-season and I came out in 2008 and I hit like .440 or something like that. I mean, I did everything they could've asked and then some, and it just so happened that Zobrist broke his thumb. I got lucky that the timing was right, and so I was able to make my debut against the Yankees in 2008 at the old Yankee Stadium. My family was there, I hit a line drive to left field against Andy Pettitte, of course nothing I'll ever forget.

Then they grabbed the ball and gave it to the clubbie, and they gave me a fake ball and spelled my name wrong. I

even have the ball in a case in my room, because it was so precious to me. But I ended up finding out later, and I've got it at the house now in a frame and everything.

**What were the highest and lowest moments of your professional career?**

The highest has got to be after you become a big leaguer. I'm a big leaguer for the rest of my life and nobody can take that from me. So I think the highest high is being able to call yourself a big leaguer, especially when that's been your goal, and your family's goal, your dad's goal, your grandpa's goal for you for your whole life. Being able to say that you're a big leaguer, and then probably getting a hit against a Hall of Famer like Andy Pettitte is a big deal, and then getting your first home run really helped me sleep at night. I hit my first home run against Jake Arrieta in 2011, and that really helps you sleep at night. Getting to play in the playoffs is pretty cool, I got to do that a couple of times, and I even got to start with the Braves in 2013. You know, just being able to say you're one of around eight players at your position that were still playing in October is a pretty cool thing. I'd say those are the highest of the highs.

The lowest of the lows, man, there are plenty of those. My dad drove probably ten hours to watch me play one time in AA and I went 0-5 with 5 punch-outs. That was a rough day. That was probably the roughest day I've had at the yard. I probably made an error that day. It wasn't a good day. I had a couple games in the big leagues where you make a big error, and you can't make errors against the Yankees because everybody's watching when you play against the Yankees. I made an error in Yankee Stadium, I think in 2012 maybe, and I'd been playing great up to that point. I just didn't make a good throw and I made an error.

It cost us a couple runs, and man, they don't let you slip when you're playing against the Yankees. Let me tell you. They freaking – they bury you.

I also made a couple errors when I was playing for the Royals, oh that was a pretty rough day. I also had a couple errors in the same game when I was playing for the Indians, also a pretty rough day. Generally, the punch-outs don't really hurt that much, because hitting is hard, but you've got to be able to make sure you catch the ball and I think those were the days that were usually the worst ones. If you go 5 for 5 punchies, that's a little bit different. That's not just one punchy, that's five.

**You mentioned that stomach surgery. What injuries did you have to deal with in your career?**

I pulled my hamstring four times, I pulled my quad four times. I actually got hit with an errant bullpen throw that hit me in my toe while I was standing on deck. I mean, listen to this garbage. Standing on deck I get hit in my big toe. We're talking about a 90 mph fastball that went under the catcher's glove and drilled my toe. It ended up breaking my nail, my trainer didn't have a toe cauterizer, and he tried to drill into it with a Phillips-head screwdriver, which probably made it worse. I finally got the pressure relieved on it the next day. The doctor popped a hole through it and let the blood seep out. When it grew back in, it came back ingrown. I had to get surgery on it, but in the meantime I was trying to play well enough to get called up in the end of August, early September there. So I'm playing with this injury and I end up pulling my quad. I didn't say anything and I tried to play through it. I ended up getting surgery on the toe after the season was over with, and ended up re-pulling that quad about three times. I had a sprained knee, sprained ankle, broke my thumb in two places, dislocated

my middle finger stealing a base, and in high school I broke both my ankles. Let's see, what else have I done? I had a pulled oblique, what else. I'm sure there's more, honestly. That's all I can think of right now.

**How did you break both your ankles?**

I was a basketball player and I could jump really high, so I went up to block a guy and came down on a teammate's foot, and landed on the side of my foot, so to speak, and broke it. I did the same thing again six or seven months later on the other foot.

**Who was your favorite player growing up as a kid?**

Mark Graves.

**When you were a professional, who was the best player that you ever played with?**

There are a bunch of them. To start, there was Longo (Evan Longoria), David Price, James Shields, Johnny Damon, Manny Ramirez, Alex Gordon, Eric Hosmer, Lorenzo Cain, Wade Davis... I mean, there is a gang of them. Michael Brantley, Jason Kipnis... I mean, there are plenty of Hall-of-Famers right there. Talking about other guys that are probably going to be there: David Price, Longo maybe, we'll see. Carl Crawford, I played with him. I mean, there are plenty of guys that are really, really good.

**Are there any memorable conflicts that you remember?**

Of course, yeah, a lot of them.

**Were you ever in a relationship during your professional career, and if so, what was it like trying to balance those two things?**

It's a challenge. I met my wife playing in the Fall League and it's challenging. A couple things; you're a long way away. She was still in school at Arizona State and I was at Alabama at the time, and it presents a lot of issues. You're not making a whole lot of money so you don't have a lot of flexibility to do things. You know, baseball players get a lot of attention so, I mean, there are a lot of problems that it presents, but, ultimately, if you want to make it work, you can.

**What is your take on the whole steroid issue? What was it like as a Major League player knowing guys on other teams, and even on your own team, possibly were doing steroids?**

I think there are a lot of people that are still making money today because of it, and I think there are plenty of people that are still skating the testing system. You think of how many guys in the recent Biogenesis deal just didn't even get hit with the test positive. They found a paper trail, because the guy at Biogenesis is an idiot and wrote their real name next to their nickname. I think everyone is going to keep doing it. I think the problem with it, because baseball is so statistic-oriented, is that kind of becomes your credibility and it becomes your place in the sun.

That's the problem we're running into with Manny right now. We don't know if he's going to be a Hall of Famer, even though he is one of the greatest hitters that I ever saw, but we don't know what's going to happen with him. I think the problem with it, is that the first players were doing it, but they don't know for sure or have the evidence



to suggest that they were doing it. So there are plenty of people who are in the Hall of Fame today that have done steroids and nobody knows about it, and there wasn't a suspicion cloud like there is today. I'm not going to tell you the names, but I know people that are in the Hall of Fame today who have definitely done steroids, and I have confirmation. It's just the way that it works. Even if you want to take it even further – if Adderall is considered a performance enhancer and greenies are considered performance enhancers, then Willie Mays and Hank Aaron, two of the greatest players of all time, I mean probably top 5 type guys of all time, have both admitted to taking greenies. But if we were playing today, you'd get slapped with a 50 game suspension. But they don't want to talk about that, because it hurts the brand, it hurts the brand of baseball, it hurts their namesake, and it hurts all those types of things.

In reality, those are everyday things. You're telling me that Pete Rose is willing to gamble on his team but he's not willing to take greenies? Go fly a kite. I mean, there's plenty of those guys and plenty of people that we don't want to talk about, because you can't tarnish their image or whatever, but they were doing it. Not only were they doing greenies, they were doing plenty of steroids too, I'm sure, whatever they could get their hands on, which was probably not even taboo back then; you could talk about it openly. But obviously now it's got to be much more secretive. Does it give you an advantage? Of course it does, without a doubt. You know, there are people today that would've never played in the big leagues, that have opportunities to make millions of dollars with it. You know, without it they probably would have never done it. And the effects of it last a whole lot longer than people think, so they're still seeing the benefits of using steroids in some capacity.

Just think about this; I saw data that suggests, and this is just for pitchers, position players are just as liable for this and there's plenty of position players in the Hall that have done it, but the data suggests that as pitchers age, they don't throw harder, they throw softer. If somebody is throwing harder in their forties, it's not because they're a freak of nature bailing hay back in the day without going to the weight room. It's because they're on something that they shouldn't have, that maybe back then wasn't considered bad or wasn't all that well-known, but they were taking something to help them. I mean, it's undeniable. Especially if you've had multiple surgeries. Your velocity is not going up, it's going down. It's not going up, especially if it's a shoulder surgery. Elbow surgery is different, but the data shows that if you get one done, you're going to get two done. That's just the way that it works. So in the short-term you probably throw harder because you're doing all those exercises and getting your range of motion back, when in reality you don't need the surgery to do that.

If you did all those workouts and exercises without TJ, you'd be able to throw harder, it's just that guys don't do it. They do it to get back onto the field and so what winds up after a while is, they stop doing the exercises, the range of motion decreases, and their strength decreases on those muscles that they were strengthening. Then they end up getting it again. But their velocities do not go up. They might in the short-term, but they definitely don't long-term, especially when they get closer to 40. Nobody's velocity is going up or sustaining at 40, it's going down. You can dig into that however you want, and I'll argue that all day with anyone.

**Are there any parts of the Collective Bargaining Agreement that you don't like or want to see changed?**

Yeah, I think it's unfair that guys have been working their entire careers to get to free agency, and all of a sudden now, they've got the draft pick compensation attached to them. I think that's unfair and I think it doesn't benefit the majority, it benefits the minority. I don't like that. I don't like that teams are using it as leverage in negotiations. I think that that's unfair to the players. I also don't like the fact that the CBA is targeting the minority and not the majority. If the average ball player plays two to four years, then why doesn't the CBA find ways to enhance the majority and not the minority. Of course I'm biased on that so it's hard for me to get that point across. However, we're talking about guys in my situation, for example in 2002, the first pick in the draft was a guy named Brian Bullington. I played in the big leagues longer than he did. He made \$4M or whatever it was out of the draft, and I made \$2M, or probably around there, playing three and a half years in the big leagues. So I was making contributions to the team at the big league level, and he didn't, and he's getting \$4M to start.

I understand that I missed that part of the draft, but it just seems to me that players need to be compensated when they're actually playing in the big leagues, more than the players are getting just to own their rights to potentially be in the big leagues. I think starting the bidding closer to \$1M or \$2M is a better barometer to start with when we're talking about minimums for guys that are playing there. Also it would be a better domino for guys who played better, than guys who you can just replace. You know, when we're talking about W.A.R. – Wins Above Replacement – replacement players are AAA. They're everywhere, so it would enhance teams to consider taking guys and making sure that they stay at the big league level longer than the guys that they can just interchange and have on the shuttle going back and forth from AAA.

So I don't necessarily like that a whole lot. I just wish they would do something a little bit better with the minimum; I think they need to get rid of draft pick compensation. I think that they need to do a better job with a number of different things when it comes to drug testing, when it comes to blood, I'm not really a big fan of them doing the blood testing during the season. I think it's unfair to players to do that, and then ask them to perform at a high level when you just took a bunch of blood out of their arm. I don't think that's very conducive, not a great idea, especially when the data doesn't suggest that it's all that reliable. I mean, they have to get a guy who did HGH within the last three days. That's not a really good window to be drawing blood from a guy, so I'm not really a big fan of that. I do like that they're going after guys, but at the same time, I don't like when you get guys who can show that they took cough syrup, or that they took an athlete's foot spray, and it had some sort of foreign substance that's banned, and it was at such a small level that it wasn't performance-enhancing. I think it would be nice to find that; where things are performance enhancing and where they're not.

A completely separate thing is, I would love for Bud Selig's image to be a little bit more realistic in regards to the collusion of Andre Dawson and that whole situation in the 80's, where Andre Dawson was an all-star, probably the best player in the game, and he ended up having to sign for a half-million dollars to play with the Cubs, because nobody would offer him a deal higher than what the Expos were offering him. Nobody wants to talk about the collusion case, because it tarnishes Bud Selig's image. However, I think that needs to be talked about more instead of him getting all this credit for reviving the game, when he was doing things that were hurting the game for such a long time, and nobody wants to ever talk about that.

Why is Marvin Miller not in the Hall of Fame? He should be in the Hall of Fame. He needs to be in the Hall of Fame. You could pretty much just point to one man, Bud Selig, as to why he's not in the Hall of Fame. When you're out of college, nobody has a problem with the draft because we're talking about people making tons of money. However, if you come out of an Ivy League school and you're the top of the top, and then you get drafted, and they have a minimum wage scale that you're allowed to get from Apple, IBM, or Microsoft, and they're going to draft you based off of where you're at and you don't get to negotiate salary, you only get to negotiate up to a certain slot system. They have rules around how much they can give, and so you don't actually get fair market value, you are actually capped. I think more people would understand when they leave college what that whole situation would be like if they were subject to the draft, if they had to do all those types of things just like ball players have to do. Of course, we're talking about a large amount of money, so it's hard to get people to understand that. The best way for people to understand it is, most people are homeowners, right? If your home is worth \$250,000, a quarter-million-dollar house, that's common. Maybe somebody tells you that your house is only worth \$125,000. They're going to give you \$125,000 to buy your house from you, even though it's valued at \$250,000. How do you feel about that offer?

You're not going to want it, but you have to take it. You have to. There's no way that you can *not* take it. Otherwise, you don't get anything. It's an example when it comes to negotiating contracts, when you come to be a free agent, or when you sign a pre-arbitration, free agency, pre-arbitration-type contract where you see your value as a quarter-million dollars, let's just use that as a round figure, and the team floats you a deal that's half of that at \$125,000. If you take that deal, all your neighbors are

essentially flipping you the bird, because now their home value has decreased significantly from where it should be. I mean, these examples happen everywhere. That's why I say it's market-driven. People don't want to wrap their minds around it because the numbers are too big for them to comprehend, but if you use smaller numbers like that, it makes it more realistic, and it makes it a little easier for people to understand market values.

**When you were at the big league level, what did it feel like to play on the biggest stage in the world? Was there a lot of pressure from the outside, or did you take it in stride?**

There's plenty of pressure, but I don't think there was pressure until after the at-bat was over, or after the play was over. If you're involved in a no-hitter, though, you know that's a perfect game, and feel that pressure. I would say those are the games where you feel constant pressure nonstop. But in games like the playoffs, you don't really feel it as much. Just in my opinion, you don't feel it as much, if the game is tight, it's there. If you're letting that outside stuff distract you, then you're not able to concentrate on what's in front of you.

**Do you have any baseball superstitions?**

Not really. Well, if I think about it I do have a few of them. Like, I always had to go on the inside of first base when I was running, if we were in the first base dugout. I had to go on the inside of third base if I was on the third base side. So if I'm returning somebody's glove and he's going to left field, I would give it to him and then run back on the inside, so I was on the home plate side of third or first, or whatever it was, stuff like that. I would always do that sort of garbage, but I don't know why. When I was running out

to short, I always had to turn over my right shoulder, or for second base I always had to turn over my right shoulder to look at first to get the ground balls when I was warming up in the inning. I don't really know if I have any other stupid stuff like that. Don't step on the chalk wasn't a huge one but, I would do it just because everyone else seemed to. I had the same routine on-deck every single time, and I had the same routine when I came to the plate every time. I don't know if that's superstition, it's more routine. So I don't really have anything crazy.

**What is your favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional baseball player?**

I think my favorite thing was just achieving a dream and being able to be in a clubhouse environment, which is one of the best things that you can ever be a part of. You're going to battle with guys that you like, and you can say whatever you want to them. You can be as offensive as possible and they don't get mad, they like it. Those are the people that you like. You know, guys will offend you and they don't mean it, and girls, they'll compliment you and they don't mean it. It's nice being in those clubhouse environments where you can say whatever you want, you can joke as much as you want, and you can be as aggressive as you want. I loved all that stuff.

My favorite part of being in the big leagues though, has definitely got to be the bus rides from the airport to the hotel while on the road. There was nothing better, absolutely nothing better. Just the entertainment value – that's what I was in charge of for a long time, making sure there was entertainment. I would tell guys, "Hey, you're going to have to sing, or dance, or tell a story that may not shed you in the best light." I used to do that stuff all the time. I used to let guys know that they were going to get

called on and make sure that they were ready. I had to do it plenty when it was my turn and the guys loved it. I didn't take it seriously, it's just kind of a rite of passage, so to speak. When it's your turn, you know you've got to wear it. I loved it. I would prepare; I had a bunch of songs, and I can still sing them right off the top of my head right now, because I prepared so much. It was anything from country, to rap, to rock, I mean, I did all kinds of good stuff. That stuff was so much fun and having done those types of things, I would get to go up and have the mic. When I played for the Indians, I got to have the mic for a while, so that was fun. We just did in-flight entertainment, that's what we called it. Those are probably the favorites.

The worst part, I guess, is just dealing with failure on such a high level. You get millions of people watching; thousands at the game, millions at home, and millions more that are using the internet to follow you. So if things aren't going well it's not the best thing in the world, especially when you have a Twitter account and everybody's letting you know about it. So that's not really a whole lot of fun, but you take it for what it's worth. You're a baseball player and people just don't understand how hard the game is. You get people that are out there, and they make it look really easy. Bill Murray Tweeted recently, "I wish there was a regular person out there with every event, just for context." It would be nice to have a regular person out playing baseball with us, just for context, so people could understand how hard it truly is.

**You talked a little bit about the clubhouse dynamic. What were some of the craziest stories of things that happened throughout your career with the team?**

Well, I could go on and on, but I'll just tell you my favorite one. I played with a guy that walked around one day with

no clothes on, just shoes and socks. Honestly, I think he put his shirt on, and had some shorts on with a zipper, but he stuck his dick inside a hot dog bun, put mustard on his dick, and was walking around asking people if they wanted a hot dog. I've got all kinds of them, but that's my favorite story of all time. That dude was a real peach.

**Has being a professional baseball player affected your love for the game at all?**

Yeah, I think it has. I used to be a die-hard Cubs fan, but now I don't watch them at all. My allegiance shifted to the Rays. Then obviously they traded me, and I wasn't really particularly happy about the way they went about it, so I got upset and I remember just torching them when I was with the Royals. I mean, my OPS was like 1200. So I just torched them and rubbed their noses in it and let them know that I wasn't happy about it. Wade Davis told me, "Oh yeah, I feel like you showing your hate for them, proves your love for them." I was like, "Man, that was profound, dude." It was philosophical, short, and concise, it was amazing. Because I did. I was all-in. I was all-in on everything they did. I did anything they asked and then some. I was all-in Rays as much as I could. And because that happened the way that it happened, my allegiance for them shifted, and now I don't follow them at all. I don't really follow anybody. I follow my friends and that's about it. My feelings have changed in a number of ways, where I don't really have an allegiance to an organization like I did before, but I do follow my friends, for the most part. Now I understand how much of a business it is where if you're helping the team, they'll do anything they can for you, but as soon as they feel like they can do something without you that makes them better, they're moving on. They want people to have an allegiance to the uniform, and not to the player.

**Did it hurt to be traded as a professional baseball player?**

Well, my situation was a little different, because Andrew (Friedman), he called me and was nice about it and said they designated me for no real reason. The reason they designated me, was they were trying to find a spot for Kelly Johnson, and they had basically moved on from me. I had a problem with it, because they kept these guys named Ryan Roberts and Sean Rodriguez, and my seasons were superior to theirs, so I felt like I helped the team way more than them. I think it was in July when I was hitting .300 from the left side...in July. You know, this is mid-season. It's July and I'm hitting .300 and Joe benched me for three straight days, and I just didn't understand what was going on. They basically said, "Your success at this point is a fabrication and we won't continue to promote your play," which was a joke, because I was playing really well at the time. So, I didn't deserve that. The magic kind of dissipated from there, you know? When it comes to timing, if you're in a groove like that, and they take you out of your groove, it messes you up.

So, we came back from the All Star break, and I played every now and again, and my numbers just plummeted where before I was playing consistently. You can look at the numbers in May and June where I almost hit .300 for the month, and that's at the big leagues; that's not a joke. I mean, I was playing every day. I remember even Keppinger, who was on the team at the time, saying to me a couple of times, coming to the courthouse, "E.J., we're jumping on your back again," because I was playing so well. They just kind of said, "Nah, we don't think it's going to happen." In fairness to them, I had a rough rookie year, but if you're not playing every day, it's hard to expect consistent results, when you're playing inconsistently. So I

was kind of bitter that they designated me the way that they did, because I felt disrespected; because I played better than Roberts, and I played better than Sean.

So I wasn't happy about that, but I understood that they needed to do it, because they were basically waiting for the Royals. It was the Royals who said they needed to wait until they have a 60-man or a roster spot. So they put Felipe Paulino, I believe, on the 60-day DL the first day of spring training. They had to wait until the first day of spring training to make that roster move, so they waited until we were in that window and then they designated me. My agent called me and told me that the Yankees were probably going to want me, all these teams were going to want me, but obviously Andrew's not going to let me go in his division, so we'll see what happens. I knew I was going to the Royals, and he told me I was going to the Royals, even though I couldn't make it public, and then Dayton (Moore) called me, and Dayton was great.

So, the Royals was a great organization, great people over there. We had a great team in 2013, but we had a really bad May, and I didn't play particularly well for them except for when we were playing against the Rays, of course. So I was pretty bitter about it, but I've moved on since then, and at this point I'm just grateful for the opportunities that they gave me.

**If you could go back in time, what do you think you would tell yourself as you were starting your professional career?**

I would tell myself to eat better. I was 150 pounds when I signed, so I knew nothing about nutrition really, so that would be the first thing, just educating myself on eating better so that I could last a full season. When I would be on

an all-star team, my August and September every year would be tough, just because I wasn't physically strong enough to make it through the year, and I wasn't eating well enough to stay through the year. So I think that would be the first place that I would start.

**What do you think the biggest misconception about professional baseball is?**

That it's easy... that they get treated really, really well. If we're talking professional baseball, anything with baseball, they think it's easy. Players think that if their coach didn't hate them, or if they hadn't gotten hurt, then they would be up there in the same place as the pros, which is a bunch of garbage. I think a lot of people think that they were good enough, and in reality they probably weren't. I would say 99% of the time they probably weren't, but it helps them sleep at night. Some people think that major-leaguers or minor-leaguers shouldn't be complaining, because they're playing a game, which is also garbage. It's business, it's a job just like any other job, so you should be compensated appropriately.

Also, there are so many twists and turns going on behind the scenes, that it's impossible to know everything, but I would say a lot of the teams have their share of shadiness going on. Especially with the Astros, and how they dealt with the draft. I'm not talking about this past one, but the one before, with Aiken. And obviously the Padres are under a lot of scrutiny right now, because of how they're handling the trades and not disclosing information like they should be, on guys' injuries.

**What are you doing now, are you still involved in baseball at all?**

I'm doing a little bit here and there. I get phone calls all the time, actually. I facilitate, more like a consultant from the baseball side. I do a lot of that sort of stuff, and I help guys manage their finances as best I can, to educate them on their options that people don't necessarily want them to know about, that I have information on. Business is crazy. It's incredibly diverse and very broad. It's impossible to know everything, but I've certainly come into some information that is valuable to plenty of guys, and right now I'm just spreading the good word as much as I can.

# CHAPTER 5

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## SHAWN RIGGANS

Drafted: 2000 by Tampa Bay Devil Rays (24<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: MLB

**What is your earliest baseball memory?**

I would say, it was probably when I was somewhere between eight to ten years old, when we went to the state tournament. It was just outside of Orlando, for our Optimis Park, which was just down the street, where I played growing up my whole life. That was the first memory that really stuck in my head I guess, because it was such a great moment in my super-short baseball career.

**What was high school baseball like for you?**

Oh, high school baseball for me was pretty much non-existent. I was on the team, I went to St. Thomas Aquinas High School, which was down near Fort Lauderdale, and even throughout the country is one of the better high schools/high school programs in the country. My first year I was on the freshman team, and I played. I did okay, but nothing special. My sophomore year I was on the JV team and then I got called up to Varsity at the end when we went to the state tournament. We lost in the state tournament my sophomore year and my junior year. My senior year our team really under-achieved, but as for myself, I didn't get one hit in high school on the varsity team. I sat the bench behind another guy who was a really good player by the name of Scott Masuko, and I really didn't have much opportunity to play.

**So did that change in college? Did you get more playing time then?**

Yeah, I went down to FIU, where I basically asked the coach there if I could play on the team. I obviously didn't have anywhere to play for college, so I went down there and I asked Stevie Minor if I could play as walk-on, and he said yes. After the first year, I actually earned a redshirt

spot on the team for FIU, with an opportunity to come back the following year. When I came back the following year in the fall, I just didn't have the best fall. So the coach told me I had a couple options of where I could go play, and one of them was Indian River Community College.

That was roughly about an hour and a half north of where I lived in Fort Lauderdale, and it was in a town called Fort Pierce, close to a larger city called Vero Beach. My dad actually went up there with me. It was right at the end of the fall season, and we did a workout for head coach Mike Eason. When we got back into the car I told my dad, "Dad, I feel like this is probably the spot for me, you know?" and he was like, "All right, well if you feel that way, get out of the car and go tell the coach that you'll be here in the spring." So I went, actually ran out of the car and I said, "You know what, I made up my mind. I don't want to go to any other school. I want to come here." Immediately following that, we went over and we signed up for classes.

About three weeks later, I was in school over there, and the first year I think I ended up hitting .415 or .410 with eight or nine home runs, and somewhere around 60 RBIs. And I got drafted, which I had no clue was going to happen. Well, I mean, I had a little idea that teams were looking at me and stuff. Throughout the course of the season I would fill out questionnaires and whatnot, but actually, when the Rays called me to tell me that I was drafted, I thought it was the kids on my team playing a joke on me. It was pretty crazy, because I hung up the phone on him. I thought it was my one buddy on the team who was my roommate and I thought they were just messing with me, so I hung up the phone! The guy called me right back and said, "No, don't hang up the phone! It's real!" Yeah, he ended up following me. I went back to Indian River and I completed my



sophomore season and just after that I signed to go play with the Rays.

**So the scouting process in college was pretty much nonexistent then? They just called you and you got drafted?**

Well, the whole process of getting drafted was throughout the course of the year. I don't know exactly how it is now, but I would imagine it's very similar. They had scouts, area scouts that go out and watch the games and they watch you throughout the course of a season, and they get kind of an idea of who you are and your make-up. And like I said, I had a really, really good freshman year. I started to fill out questionnaires for teams regularly, and after the state tournament I thought I was either going to get drafted by the Marlins or the Dodgers. And you know, the Rays called. I guess it was the 24<sup>th</sup> round when I got drafted and, like I said, I came back the following year and played my sophomore season before actually signing.

**Once you realized that it wasn't a prank call and it was actually real, what was going through your mind when you got drafted?**

I was just so, thrown off, you know? Like I said, I knew I had a good season, but it was such a long stretch from where I was two years ago at St. Thomas, in the dance, but never recording a single hit in varsity baseball in high school, to being drafted a few years later and being one of the top junior college players in the whole country. It was a major, major turn of events in such a short period of time.

**What do you remember about your first day of professional baseball?**

I remember it vividly. My dad actually dropped me off. We drove to St. Pete from my house in Southwest Ranches, FL, which is like Fort Lauderdale, a suburb west of Fort Lauderdale. We drove over, took the Alligator Alley across, about a three-hour drive. The whole time I was very excited but nervous, and I remember when I got there, they had my locker. It was at our complex in St. Petersburg downtown, called Vince Naimoli Park. So I got there, put my stuff in my locker, and about five minutes later a guy named Tim McKeckney, who was the assistant clubhouse manager for the Minor League side in St. Pete, came over to me and said, "Here, this is your schedule for today with what we have to go do." I was like, "What?" There was no one even there. I was just thinking, "Okay!" I went outside and actually threw with him, and, threw right on the first field there. I remember we were out in right field. We threw and then I had to do some running, and after I was done with my running, they told me to wait around and that the vans would be back soon from the game and they'd give me a ride to the hotel. It was, God, probably about two hours later that the vans showed up, because the guys were at a game and right when they got there, I saw one of my buddies who I played with in high school, George McDurrow...he was on our team. He was a catcher who was also drafted. And, you know, it was nice to have George there. Since George was one of my buddies, we became roommates. He was my first roommate. Actually, he kicked his roommate out, and I moved in. It was a really good time.

**How were you treated when you were new to professional baseball, were you hazed at all?**

No, there was no hazing process. In baseball, the hazing is more of just, younger guys staying out of the way of the older guys. You really just want to go and do your thing

and be unnoticed, you know? Not heard, not seen. You try to just get all your stuff done in a timely fashion early on, and let the older guys, you know, go at their own pace. But there was no hazing, just guys being guys. If you think about it, you have kids that are seventeen years old, coming straight out of high school, in the same locker room with a major-leaguer who has 10+ years who's rehabbing his arm. You guys are all in the same locker room. So needless to say, the game kind of polices itself. There are enough people around (but not hazing, just guys being guys), enough people in place that if someone stepped out of line, they deal with it accordingly. But there's nothing that would make anybody feel uncomfortable like hazing. When I hear the word "hazing," to me it has a double meaning. It can mean, *okay we're having fun with some guy*, but then there are other people that take it too far, I think, from what we've seen. Especially in the news the last couple of years now. It's not just baseball, and not just other sports. You see it everywhere. To have fun with it is one thing, but to actually be obnoxious and take it too far is a totally different thing.

**What were your goals when you started professional ball and how did they change as you progressed from level to level?**

My goal was to make the Major Leagues as fast as possible. That's all I wanted to do; make it to the Major Leagues. I wanted to be able to provide for my family. You know, you put in so much work and time, that I didn't want to be in the Minor Leagues long. I wanted to make that stay as short as possible, and fortunately, even though I had numerous setbacks with injuries making it very tough on me mentally, my goal was, from day one, to make it to the Major Leagues. That was my goal when I was a little kid, it never changed, and I was fortunate enough to be able to do it.

**Tell me about your injuries and how you were able to deal with being injured.**

Actually, my very first injury was when I first signed...probably two or three months into signing. I tore my UCL which, you know, is commonly known as Tommy John. I had Tommy John surgery at the ulnar collateral ligament, which I tore immediately in my rookie year in the Minor Leagues. That was a very long, drawn-out process to come back from that.

I also had a bunch of setbacks due to shoulder issues. Coming back was so tough on me mentally. I was really, really going good, too, when I blew out my arm. If I remember correctly, I only had 40 at-bats, and I had seven home runs and a bunch of RBI's, just starting out in pro ball. I was really, really on a good streak and then that hit me and it was tough. It was very, very tough, not only on me, but also on my family, and I was still young. I was 21 years old and I had never been through anything like that. Following that, in '04 and '07 I had bone fragments cleaned out of my elbow, and then I had my knee surgery in 2008, right before the World Series, which was another bummer. In addition, in 2009 or 2010, I had my shoulder cleaned out, which ultimately put me out of the game.

**Can you talk more about the mental side? With all those injuries sidelining you, how did you balance those injuries with trying to keep up your professional career?**

Well, that was all I knew; to try and get back out on the field. You can't do anything in any sport being hurt. You have to get back out there onto the field to just pave your way, so that's all my focus was; getting back out on that field. I think at times I probably overdid it a little bit with

the training, and I actually probably hurt myself more than benefitting myself.

But it is very, very tough mentally when you take any athlete at a certain caliber and tell them they can't go out there and do what they like to do, and what they know how to do. It's going to beat them up mentally. Unfortunately for me, I had five surgeries. Just as I would start to get on a roll, I would have another setback. Then I would get on another roll, and have another setback. So it was super, super taxing, and it affects you more than just mentally, it also affects you off the field, just dealing with everyday life, because you can't do what you love, number one, and do what you do that ultimately pays your bills. At the end of the day, we love it, but we're doing it to make money.

**As you were coming up through the ranks of professional baseball, what was different from level to level?**

Well, the biggest thing is the speed of the game. Early on, you really don't see it in the lower levels of the Minor Leagues. The biggest change you see in the lower levels is the fields. I mean, you go to these fields and they may have horrible lighting, horrible playing surfaces. Maybe not horrible, but definitely not the most favorable surfaces, not the most favorable lights. You have some kids that come from teams in the SEC in college that have beautiful fields, but those were colleges. These are fields in small towns, and it's shocking. It's shocking to a lot of guys. You walk into the clubhouses, and you're lucky if you have hot water. But the SEC, gosh, those places are luxurious. So that's one of the major differences.

So, as you get into the higher levels, the speed of the game really starts to speed up, and you don't see people making

mental mistakes like in the lower levels. I tell everybody it's just like a funnel; an upside-down funnel, so as you get up higher, and higher, and higher, everybody – all the other people – just fall off the sides. You see a lot of very good players that just don't make it so you have to be lucky, to be in the right place at the right time, and people have to like you. If that all comes together at the right time, you know you got lucky. The biggest difference, like I said though, is the speed of the game, and less mistakes mentally and physically as you're getting higher and higher in the levels.

The playing field really, really, really starts to even out to where everybody is good. In the Minor Leagues, like in A-ball, you might have one or two starting pitchers and a couple guys out of the bullpen that are top-notch guys, but then you move up to AA and now you might have two or three starters, two or three in the bullpen; AAA you've got a couple more, and then obviously when you get to the Major Leagues, everybody is very qualified to be out there to say the least.

**What is the lifestyle of a minor-leaguer like? What was it like to travel so much, and the hotels, and the food?**

In the Minor Leagues, and I don't want to knock Golden Corral, but it's like Golden Corral and the Major Leagues is Ruth's Chris Steakhouse, or your favorite steak place. It's like that for everything. For example, for your bus rides in A-ball, you might have a 12-14-hour ride, doubled up in a seat with another teammate. You're stopping to eat at gas stations, and you're making \$350-400 every two weeks. You're not making any money, and you still get by. You do it for the love of the game, but as you continue and you make progress, things start to change. You get up to AA, and now all of a sudden you've got to take two buses and

they're serving you food inside the clubhouses – hot meals – after the game.

You know, you really see the biggest jump from High-A to AA and everything. Like I said, with your buses and your hotels in AAA you're only one step away from the Major League, so you know, it's nothing comparable to the Major Leagues but it's nice for the Minor Leagues, I'll tell you. And in AAA you're a stud; a couple mules, the clubhouses are bigger, you know you have more clubhouse attendants taking care of you. In the Minor League at the lower levels, in A-ball, I don't even think there's a clubhouse attendant. I can't even really remember. Some days your uniforms aren't even washed. Let me tell you, you put on a uniform that's been in a garbage bag all night with 50 other uniforms and soaked in sweat, it's not the most pleasant.

**What has your experience with roommates been like? Did you ever have a bad roommate or was it always pretty smooth?**

I pretty much got along with everybody. You could pick your own roommate or they would give you a roommate... It was really a non-factor for me.

**What were your highest and lowest moments in professional baseball?**

My highest moment definitely was going to the World Series in 2008. When we recorded the last out against the Red Sox it was a feeling I can't even describe. I felt like, everything just comes to the surface and all the hard work that you've done for so many years is paying off. That's where every athlete dreams of being, at the top of their game. Whether it's the NFL and you're playing the Super Bowl, NHL in the Stanley Cup Finals, the NBA Finals, or

whatever it is, that's where you dream. I think every single kid who practices baseball says something like, "bottom of the ninth, two outs in the World Series..." I mean, I think that comes out of any kid's mouth that has some desire to actually, really be the best that they can be, and I was fortunate that I got to live it. It was a feeling that I can't even really explain. My family was there, my wife was there, it was awesome... especially that I could experience it with the people that I loved the most. I was also with a great group of guys, a bunch of guys that I actually played with in the Minor Leagues. So I mean, that was probably my best moment that I ever had in baseball for sure.

My lowest moment... one of my worst moments had to be when I blew my arm out in the Minor Leagues at the very beginning. When I blew out my elbow it was a tough time for me. I was young. I was really, really, really doing good at that time, I've never experienced anything like that in my life. So for them to tell me that I wasn't going to be playing for basically a year and a half, it was hard to fathom, so that was tough. Also, in 2009 when the Rays called me, I was playing winter ball down in Puerto Rico. They told me that they weren't going to tender me, so I was going to be a non-tender where they weren't going to renew my contract. That was another very, very tough moment for me, because I opted not to have shoulder surgery in 2009 to try and continue. That decision probably ultimately put me out of baseball, because it took me another year or so to actually get the surgery so it just prolonged everything, and I was a year or two older. But looking back on it now I wouldn't have changed a thing.

**When you were talking about the World Series, that feeling that was indescribable, being on the biggest stage in the world, what is the pressure like in that moment?**

To be honest there's really no pressure at that time. I tell the kids that I do baseball lessons with, that you can put pressure on yourself, but other people, they shouldn't put pressure on you. You're doing this for yourself. At the end of the day, yes, you play for a team like the Rays or the Mets, but you play for your last name, you play for pride, and you play for your peers, the people that are looking at you. That's who you play for, and you play because you have the desire to be the best you want to be.

So, being in the World Series, I know it might sound crazy, but it is just another game. Granted, you have a bunch of people watching. The whole world is watching it, but it's more fun than anything though. I'll tell you, every moment was an absolute blast. I mean I could almost recall everything that was going on in such great detail, but it just went by so fast. But to say there's pressure – at that point, I think the pressure is almost off. Getting to the World Series and all the buildup, going through all the levels of the playoffs, that's pressure. But once you're there, now it's time to relax, and you've got a job to do; try to win four more games.

**How has playing professional baseball changed your perception of the sport?**

I didn't know exactly what went into it when I was younger. Once I played, I realized how much really does go into it and how many guys are competing for such a small number of jobs. You almost think, when you get drafted, the world stops. Well it doesn't, because there's another draft another year from today, and then they're going to bring in a whole new group of guys that think the same way you do and think that they're going to be the next best thing ever. So it's a long, long process and it takes hours, and

hours, and hours of just working and being told that you're not going to do it.

You know, baseball is a very, very, very negative sport. Baseball is one of the only sports that you can fail so much, and be so successful. It's very negative, because you hear a lot of negative things coming up. Maybe not everybody, but most people want to be the person that says, "I told you that guy wouldn't do it," because that's how a majority of things end up panning out; the majority of the guys, they don't end up making it. But I love professional sports and I'll tell you one thing about being in professional baseball; if you're a guy that's mentally strong, mentally tough, and can deal with people criticizing you, you'll come out on the other side a better person, because it's very, very negative so you just have to learn how to deal with all the negativity going on around you. That way, when a positive situation presents itself, you're ready to grab ahold of it.

**Did you ever get in memorable conflicts with other players or coaches throughout your career?**

I really didn't get into it with other players. I mean, I was more about joking around with other people, and we would mess with each other. I wasn't a big conflict person. With coaches though, I did have a couple with whom I didn't see eye to eye. Early on there was a guy by the name of Dave Howard, who was my manager in the New York Penn League. He and I just didn't see eye to eye. Let me say though, I would always try to press his buttons. Now that I'm older looking back on it, I know I would press his buttons and we would go to war all the time. I know it took away from the team and stuff, because he had to end up dealing with me a lot. I was just more of a pain in the neck to him than anything. Other than that, I got along with my coaches. They were there for a reason, whether they liked

me or not, so they had to deal with me and I had to deal with them. That's just kind of how I looked at it. So I got along with all my coaches and they're there too; going through the same struggles. The majority of those guys, they're trying to get to the big leagues also, and everybody has a different way of going about that and you respect that. You respect the others around you and their work ethic, and what they do, and you stick to yourself and try to get to the top, just like they are.

**What's your take on the whole steroid issue? As a former player, what was it like knowing that guys were cheating at the game, when you were working so hard?**

Well, the steroid thing has gone on now for however many years, and it's unfortunate. Baseball seasons are very long; 162 games plus 30 in spring training, so let's just say that you play 200 games over the course of about seven months? I can tell you to go out there and to do it on protein shakes and good healthy eating and all that stuff, and drink a lot of water. But to say that you believe that's what some guys do it off of, you're mistaken. Those are very, very long seasons. I'm not promoting anybody doing anything to cheat the game. You have to have integrity for the game, but there's an issue when you can have somebody who's a full-blown cocaine or heroin addict on your team, but heaven forbid they take one Adderall. If he takes one Adderall, he's suspended for 50 games and looked at as a cheater. So to me it's absolutely ridiculous.

And on the flip side of that, there's no consequence for taking steroids. They can take 50 games away from somebody making \$15 million dollars and tell them that they're getting no pay, but as soon as those 50 games are up, that guy is right back at it, and you never hear anything about it again. If we flash back to Barry Bonds, and by the

way, I love Barry Bonds. I love the guy to death, and he used to be one of my favorite players ever. But to sit here and to say, "Oh, Barry Bonds is the worst human being on the planet..." The guy has a job in the Major Leagues again, he's a hitting coach for the Florida Marlins. Did that really affect his career? Whose career has failing the steroid test affected in a negative manner? Not one that I know of. If I could rewind the clock going through all my injuries, I would do whatever I had to do now, knowing what I know, to get back on that field and stay on that field, because going through what I have to go through now to go get another career and start over again at my age, it's tough. So if I could turn back the clock to 2009 or 2010, I'm not saying what I would do, but I would try to look for any advantage that I could get to secure myself a spot on the team again. And like I said, there's just no consequence for it, so until there's a consequence, a real consequence, it's going to continue in every sport at every level.

**Besides frustration about the lack of consequences for steroids, are there any parts of the Collective Bargaining Agreement that you don't like or would want to see changed?**

Well, as far as the small intricate details of everything that the Baseball Players Association stands for, that association is unbelievable and whatever they have in place, they have in place for a reason, and they have people much smarter than me working on that stuff all the time. At the end of the day we both know that MLB, Major League Baseball, is a business and they say they care about the guys and all this stuff, but at the end of the day those owners are looking at bottom-line numbers. I don't care what they tell you, they're looking at a bottom-line number; if they couldn't make money in doing it, they would not do it. So you know, the rules are in there for a certain reason; they're in

there to keep those guys who bend the rules and they're there so those people can continue to play and put people in the seats. If it wasn't for these super star athletes, people wouldn't be coming to the games. I think whatever they're doing right now, baseball is as strong as it's ever been so I wouldn't change a thing.

**Who's the best player you've ever played alongside?**

I mean, probably playing against Miguel Cabrera, one of my favorite guys, but one of the toughest people to get out when we played against them was Victor Martinez. I know that there are guys that are stronger, faster, all this, but I feel like Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez were like a constant headache; those guys were very, very tough out all the time. I mean, there are so many guys out there though. Joe Mauer, back when he was younger, was another one who was a very, very tough out and he was a great defensive player. But there were so many guys, I mean pitching-wise, defensive-wise, hitting-wise; you know, everybody that you're playing with is so capable, but I would say that, if there was one guy, I would probably have to go with Miguel Cabrera.

**Did you have any baseball superstitions?**

No, I didn't have many superstitions. I always liked to wipe down my bat at the end of the game before I put it in my locker. I would always wipe it down and put it in the corner of my locker, but other than that I really didn't have many. I didn't have anything that I liked to eat at a particular time or do anything at a particular time. That wasn't me, I didn't get too caught up with any of that crazy stuff. Some guys though, they do that religiously, but I really didn't have many superstitions. I guess cleaning my bat after every game would've been mine.

**What's your favorite hobby, other than baseball; something you like to do for fun?**

Fish. One hundred percent fish. Our family is huge into fishing and that's how I waste most of my time.

**What is your favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional baseball player?**

Oh, boy. My favorite thing is definitely the pay. My least favorite thing is the duration of the job.

**What are some of the craziest or funniest stories that have happened throughout your career with the team?**

Oh! I have a good one. So, we were in Charleston, West Virginia, or Charleston, South Carolina, but it was right before the beginning of the season. I think there were about four or five of us in one truck and our practice got moved down the street, because our field was flooded. So we were on our way down the street, and in our car we had me, Delmon Young, Elijah Dukes, and Elliot Johnson, and we were going by this basketball court. And this kid Elliot, he was the guy that just was a very, very good athlete, but he would just never settle for second best. He was like a Tommy Talker; if you caught a 3-pound fish, he caught a 3.5-pound fish. So we're driving up and there was a basketball court, and this one guy drove to the hole and dunked the ball pretty good, so Elliot of course was like, "Man, that's nothing." He said, "Watch what I do here." So he literally had us stop the truck, and he was wearing a pair of rubber cleats. He runs out onto the court, asks one of the guys, "Hey, let me shoot a ball," so the guy flips him a ball. Elliot makes this one little quick move, a stutter step, and when he went to jump his foot slipped out from underneath him, and he landed on his back. It was in front of two other

carloads of guys on the team, and everybody was dying laughing. And Elliot just hung his head and came off the court. So that was pretty funny.

**What do you think is the biggest misconception about professional baseball players?**

That is when people think it's easy; you know, you just work a couple of hours a day, 7:00-10:00 at night. It's ridiculous the amount of time you have to put into it. It's over a 40-hour job week, you know? The game lasts three hours, but you're at the field every day between seven and ten hours depending on who you are. So it's the amount of time you're actually at the field.

**As you were coming through the system what do you think set you apart from your peers and got you to the Major Leagues?**

It was just the ability I had to play catcher defensively. I think I was our top ranked catcher in the organization for years, and the fact that I could hit always gave me a pretty good offensive game coming up, and defensively I was as good as our organization had. I was the best, like I said. I think I was ranked the highest catcher in our organization year after year and my ability to hit was just another added bonus. So putting those two things together really helped me out.

**Are you still involved in baseball right now at all?**

I do private lessons for kids of all ages, and I'm actually almost done with my firefighters' certification. I have a couple more semesters of school to finish out my paramedic degree.

**How did you decide to get involved with that?**

I was going to school for physical therapy and I realized that I didn't want to be sitting inside all day. So a buddy of mine who's a fireman said, "Hey listen, this job pays very well and you work nine times a month," so as soon as he told me that I said, "Where do I sign up?"

**Do you have any regrets about your baseball career**

No, I don't have any regrets. I think if there's anything I would've done a little bit differently, I wouldn't have worked out so much. I would've let my body rest a little bit more, knowing what I know today, and other than that I wouldn't change anything.

**If you could go back in time, what do you think you would tell yourself as you were starting your professional career?**

Make sure you finish your college education before you sign.



# CHAPTER 6

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## JUSTIN SEAGER

Drafted: 2013 by Seattle Mariners (12<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: AA

**What is your earliest baseball memory?**

It was probably playing wiffle ball and stuff in the yard with my brothers and my dad, playing pick-up, and just swinging. Just having fun and enjoying the game.

**From then on, did you play baseball all the way up through high school?**

Yes, but actually, I stopped playing for a little over a year in about in sixth grade, maybe fifth grade, and I played travel basketball instead. But my friends would go out and play in tournaments and stuff, and after a while I got that itch again and enjoyed baseball that much more. I feel like I got refueled and went back and started playing the game again. Ever since then it's just baseball.

**What was high school baseball like for you?**

High school baseball was a lot of fun. I was a late bloomer so I was really little my freshman and sophomore years of high school. I was about 5'4, 110 lbs., but I grew eight inches after my sophomore year of school, and that's when I really started to develop into a better player. High school was a lot of fun with the companionship and camaraderie, and also progressing my abilities while trying to possibly get recruited by colleges and stuff. So it was a little nerve-racking but also exciting.

**Did the scouting process start in high school or was that later in college?**

For me, as a late bloomer, I had trouble getting scouted by professional scouts and stuff, because I was always smaller. Once I did grow, I hadn't really caught up to my body yet, so I was still pretty skinny and hadn't really developed

much muscle yet, and that sort of thing. So college scouts were starting to recruit, but not that much, because I was behind the curve a little, so I didn't get the professional scouting until I got to Charlotte. That's where I really developed into the player I am today. I started getting some muscle, played with better competition, and really developed.

**How is college baseball different than high school? Were there differences besides higher competition?**

There were a lot of differences. Once you go to college baseball, obviously you have a lot of fun and that sort of thing, but you're expected to get the job done; you're expected to go out and try to win as much as possible, and it's a lot more demanding than high school baseball. You have your workouts in the off-season, but you also have your early morning weights and conditioning, and then you have your practices that last for a long time.

Once the season starts, you play a lot more games than in high school, and it's a lot more demanding. When you build that companionship and camaraderie, that's what makes it fun; going out with the same group of guys when you're working your tail off in the off-season and before the games, so you really become a close-knit group. That's when it's fun, when you go out and try to win for your team and your school, and all that good stuff.

**When you were drafted by the Mariners coming out of Charlotte, what was going through your mind?**

It was really cool, because my brother Kyle was already in the Mariners organization, and once I saw my name I just stared at it. I was ecstatic just to be drafted. Once I heard it was the Mariners, I was like, "Oh man, that's really cool!"

It was cool to be in the same organization as my older brother. It's just a surreal moment. There's literally no way to put it into words. It's just a dream come true, and you get to chase after your dream, so it's really special.

**What do you remember about your first day of professional baseball?**

I was a little bit nervous. I didn't know what to expect and didn't really know how to go about business, but that's what the Minor Leagues are for. You learn how to act, how to conduct yourself, and what you need to do to be ready each day. Thankfully there were some guys that had been in the organization for a little bit already, and they helped me out with what we were doing.

Rob Mummau was my manager, and he's a really great guy and a really great coach. I have a lot of respect for him. He made the transition a lot better, too. The first lesson I got was when I went up to him and said, "Excuse me, coach, what do you want me to do?" or something. He said, "No, no, you don't need to call me coach. Don't ever call me coach. I'm either your manager, your skip, or I'm Rob." So that was the first lesson. I guess I was too formal, so that's not too bad of a thing, but it was pretty cool.

**Were you hazed coming into the league, or was it a pretty smooth transition?**

You get messed around with by the guys in general, but I still goof off, even now that I've been playing for a couple years. It's not really like hazing, it's more like goofing off with the guys.

**What were your goals when you started your professional career? Have they changed from that moment until now?**

The main goal is to consistently work hard to get better and try to make it to the Major Leagues, obviously. And as I've gone through each level in different years, that's still the main focus. I've also had other goals as in developing a certain area that I need to work on, trying to make an All-Star game, trying to have a good year and get moved up, and that sort of thing. The smaller goals change year-to-year, but the main goal, the main focus, is always to make it to the big leagues.

**From your experience, how are the levels of the minors different? What changes from level to level?**

As you move up, the guys are more consistent with what they do each day, every at-bat, every pitch, or whatever the scenario is. Players are just more consistent. There's a lot of talent in professional baseball at every level. What differentiates each person is their consistency or ability to go out and do the same thing every day, like, have good at-bats, get consistent barrel to the ball, consistently locate pitches in the zone, or whatever the situation is.

**Can you describe your experience traveling for road games; the hotels, the food, and the whole experience?**

That's very dependent upon what league you're in or where you are. In some leagues, there are some really long trips, which is pretty rough like when you're leaving after a game to go back home. I remember my first year in Everett when we had a 13-hour bus ride after the game, and we didn't get back until almost the next afternoon. You're trying to sleep on the bus, and it's very uncomfortable. Then the next day

you've got to get up and be at the field to play another game.

Sometimes that side of things isn't noticed by the normal fan, but it wears on you, especially with how long the year is and if you've got a couple of trips like that. You're trying to sleep on the bus, the next day you've got to perform, and that's pretty tough sometimes. Luckily the California League that I'm in right now is pretty light on travel, especially since we're in the middle of the whole league; it doesn't really matter where we go, our trips aren't bad. It definitely helps, because even if it's a three-to-four-hour trip, you're not getting back too, too late, and you can still go back and sleep in a bed and kind of catch up on some sleep.

The hotel situation depends on where you are. You might luck out and have a pretty nice hotel, but really, you're just focused on getting a nice bed. Then you hope for a couple of options for food that are within walking distance, because you don't have your cars on the road, and that's what stinks. So it's tough sometimes, and it can catch up to you if you can't get a good meal or a good night's sleep.

**How has your experience been with roommates; ever had a bad one?**

I've been pretty lucky to have had some good roommates. For the most part you get to pick your roommates, but if you come into the season late or get called up, sometimes you get stuck with whoever doesn't have a roommate, or whoever's roommate is left, that sort of thing. Sometimes you get matched up with somebody you weren't expecting, but when that has happened to me I've been pretty lucky to have good roommates. No complaints on that end.

**So far in your professional career, has there ever been a moment in which you wanted to quit, and if so, how did you overcome it?**

I've never wanted to quit. There have definitely been some trying times when you might be in a bad place, you might get down on yourself, but I've never wanted to quit. I love playing baseball. I love what I do. It's a dream come true, and I'm going to keep working at it. Hopefully it works out for me and I do get a shot at the big leagues, but I've never wanted to give up. That drives me to keep working hard, but like I said you do have those days where you might be in a funk. You might be struggling at the plate, or whatever it is, and you're kind of down on yourself. You're like, "Dang, what can I do to start hitting the ball again?" and sometimes you don't know if you're going to. But you've just got to stay focused and try to keep your head as clear as possible, just keep working and doing what you've been doing the whole time. It will eventually turn around as long as you stay focused.

**What do you, personally, do to regain your composure when you're off your game?**

It's tough mentally. You have those long bus rides or whatever, and if you're in a funk, mentally it wears on you. You're away from family so long, which is a problem for me. It wears on you, but you have to stay focused and put your work in. When I'm struggling, I like to watch a lot of video and go in the cages and do some work early, or whatever. I talk to my brothers quite a bit, my dad, my hitting coaches, and that sort of thing. All of that helps, and you've just got to find what works for you, and what gets you back on track.

**While playing professional baseball, have you found that coaches will try to change your swing a lot, or do they let you do your own thing?**

For the most part they've let me do my own thing. I think they know that I work with my brothers, and with Kyle being in the same organization, we watch video and we talk a lot. For the most part I've had some really good hitting coaches who don't try to cookie-cut each person and make them into something they're not. The hitting coaches I've had have been very good about that, and they've been very good about answering my questions. I can ask them if they see something, and we talk through it, talk through what I've been working on and what I'm trying to do. A good example of that is Max Venable, my current hitting coach. He's been very good about helping me with what I'm trying to work on. I'm not trying to change anything, but we talk through mechanics and stuff. He's also been a huge help on the mental side of it, the approach, and that sort of thing, which is a huge part of hitting also. So he's been a huge help with that.

**What are the highest and lowest moments of your career so far?**

My lowest moment was last year. I had a tough year, and I tried to do some things that I don't do as a player. I tried to be a different person, and it didn't work out for me. I had to figure out what does work for me and kind of build off of that. So last year was rough for me, because I struggled quite a bit.

As far as my highest point, I've had a couple of pretty good ones so far, and hopefully I'll have some more. When I was drafted, obviously, was a huge point. When I was an All-Star in the Northwoods League, that was very special to

me. I think one of the coolest things that I've done so far in the minors was when I was in Clinton, and we were losing by sixteen runs but came back and won in ten or eleven innings. I had a really good night at the plate, and I was a part of that comeback, which was really cool. That has been the biggest comeback in Minor League baseball history. We were on ESPN and Sports Illustrated, so that was one of the coolest things I've done in my career so far.

**Have you had many injuries so far in your professional career? What has that been like?**

Yeah, injury is a big part of it too. It's such a long year, you have these little knick-knack things that bother you. Luckily I've been pretty blessed to not have too many injuries. I had a pretty tough one last year. I was diving into second base, trying to move up a base, and the catcher threw down to second. The second baseman leaned in and I pretty much dove on top of his knee. All my weight went down on his knee and he was grounded, so I pretty much landed right on his knee. I had a rib contusion, so I messed up my ribs pretty bad. That knocked me out for a couple of days. It took me a while to really get back to where I felt good and felt comfortable. For a while, it was tough to swing, to breathe, and that sort of thing. That's probably the worst I've had so far in my career. Hopefully not too many.

**Who was your favorite player growing up?**

My favorite player growing up was definitely Derek Jeter. He was just an unbelievable player, hard worker, not cocky, and wasn't out wanting to be in the spotlight all the time. He's just a great guy, and he knew he was working hard and trying to be the best at what he does. He's going to go

down as one of the greatest players ever. It was definitely Jeter.

**How has playing professional baseball changed your perception of the sport?**

That's a good question. Growing up I had no idea about the process the big-leaguers took to get to where they are right now. No idea how much work and how much effort went into getting to that point, and now obviously, I still have a long way to get there, but I'm going to keep working and trying to get to the big leagues, stay there, and have a career. I think that's the biggest thing. Obviously I love playing baseball, and it was just fun for me growing up. To see how much effort and how much hard work you have to put into it to get to where those guys are right now, gives me a lot more respect for them. So I think that's the biggest thing that's opened my eyes to professional baseball. It definitely takes some talent, but you've got to put in a lot of hours and a lot of hard work to get to where those guys are.

**Have you gotten in any major conflicts with players or coaches so far?**

I haven't really had too many conflicts. You know, it's a long season, and you're staying with a group of guys literally every single day, day in and day out. And like I said, sometimes you're on those buses for a long time, and you're not getting much sleep, so after a while people sometimes will crash, like bang heads a little bit, but overall I've never really had trouble with teammates. Like I said, it's a long season, so you have little arguments and stuff, but in the long haul you guys are friends, you are teammates, so it has been pretty good so far.

**The other day, Nate Schierholtz was suspended for 80 games for using performance enhancing drugs. What is it like as a player, to know that guys at the big league level are cheating while you're working so hard?**

It leaves a little bit of a bad taste in your mouth. Sometimes you second-guess that type of thing, but in the long haul, you lose a little bit of respect for those guys. But at the same time, I think that they didn't need to do it necessarily. Most of them could've still been unbelievable players if they didn't do it, and I think that's what sticks for me, is that I don't have to. I can be an unbelievable player without it, and I'm still a good player. It just leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

**What is your favorite hobby other than baseball? What do you like to do for fun?**

I really like playing basketball. I played basketball in high school and I play pick up with buddies all the time. I love playing basketball, I love shooting hoops and that sort of thing. I like to hunt. My brothers and I go hunting with my dad in the off-season. We try to make one big trip up to New York where most of my dad's family still lives. We go up there and go hunting on the family land, and we get to see family and that sort of thing. I really like to hunt. I'm pretty outdoorsy so I like to hunt, fish, go out, and shoot some hoops. Also, I like ping pong. I'm a big ping pong guy... just random stuff.

**Do you have any baseball superstitions?**

Yeah, but nothing too serious. Sometimes with my batting gloves, my elbow guard, or other equipment, I'll put them on the same way as when I got a hit or something. Just little things like that, nothing too serious.

**What's your favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional baseball player?**

My favorite thing, obviously, is that I get to play baseball for my job. It's not a bad gig. I really enjoy playing baseball and getting the opportunity to keep progressing and possibly play in the big leagues. You know, that's been my dream since I was a kid. My least favorite thing is probably, again, being away from family and away from home for so long. I think that's the toughest part.

**Has being a professional baseball player affected your love of the game at all, or is it still as strong as it was when you started?**

No, I still love playing baseball. I still go out each day and try to have as much fun as possible. Like I said earlier, my job is to play baseball, so I couldn't really ask for anything else.

**If you could go back in time, what would you tell your former self, as you were starting your professional career?**

I would just say to keep working hard and stay focused, but the biggest thing would be to not try to be something you're not. Know your game and know what type of player you are. Progress your strengths and don't try to be somebody you're not.

# CHAPTER 7

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## TREY AMBURGEY

Drafted: 2015 by New York Yankees (13<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: A+

**What is your earliest baseball memory?**

My earliest baseball memory was when I was ten years old and we went to a place called Callick in little league, I played that and attended the ten-year-old World Series. We lost our championship, but it was a good experience. Besides that, probably Cooperstown. That was fun.

**Did you play baseball throughout your childhood?**

Yeah, I've played since I was, I think, five years old. I took a year off when I was twelve, but I came back when I was thirteen, and I've been playing ever since.

**What was high school baseball like for you; were you a lot better than your teammates?**

Well, actually, I played with a lot of the same kids that I played with growing up, so we're all pretty similar in some aspects, so I wouldn't say I was better, I just kept working at it. Some of them stopped working and stopped playing, but I just kept at it.

**Were you being scouted at all in high school or was that not until later?**

Junior year I started getting some attention, but not too much. I was under the radar with colleges and stuff so I didn't really get out there until college.

**What was the scouting process like in college?**

It's nothing exciting; scouts just send you letters, tell you to fill this out and all the information, they're going to get anything really in-depth at the end of the season. They called me, they invited me to workouts, and all the stuff for

the draft. So it's an exciting time, but it's not really exciting at the same time.

**What did it feel like to get drafted by the Yankees?**

Being a Red Sox fan, at first it was a little bittersweet. But it's a dream come true, because I've wanted to play since I was five years old, so it was also a good feeling.

**How were you treated when you were new to the League; were you hazed at all by your teammates or was it a pretty smooth transition?**

No, it was a smooth transition. Everyone gets along pretty well here so it's like – we preach family here, so it's all pretty much a big family; everything's good with everyone. No hazing yet.

**Have you gotten in any conflicts with players or coaches?**

No, no problems. It's been pretty smooth. My coaches and teammates have been great, so I'll have to see. We'll get into little arguments, but nothing too serious. Besides that, it's been really good.

**What do you think has been your greatest and lowest moments so far as a professional player?**

My greatest moment would be last year. It was a pretty successful year, and it was my first time in pro-ball and I was doing well. The lowest moment was probably back in April when I got hurt and I was out for two months, having to sit off to the side watching everyone sucked, but I'm playing again now.



**Was that the first major injury you've had to deal with, or did you have injuries you dealt with in college and high school?**

Yeah, I've never really been hurt. Obviously I had broken bones earlier when I was younger, like everyone else has, but nothing in high school, nothing in college. I wasn't really hurt much, so this was really the first time I've been hurt.

**Do you have any baseball superstitions?**

Usually when I go up to the plate I'll tap the plate twice and move the dirt around a little bit but nothing disgusting or stupid like that – nothing crazy.

**Do you think that you have a favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional?**

My favorite thing is probably getting to play baseball for a living and get paid doing it. I like getting to meet Major League guys like Tim Lincecum. I've gotten to hang out with them, gotten to meet Hall of Famers and all that stuff, so that's probably the best thing, just going to the races with all these guys. And then the worst part is probably traveling.

**What has life been like while travelling for baseball? I mean, is it rough staying in all those motels?**

It's a little tedious, but in the league I'm in now, it's not really bad, because we don't travel far. It's all in Florida. But in Charleston I went on a thirteen-hour bus ride, so that was brutal, but it hasn't been too bad yet. Travelling sucks though; staying at hotels all the time is not very fun, but it's what you've got to do.

**Has being a professional baseball player affected your love of the game at all?**

It has tested it, that's for sure. Playing every day is not easy. You have to seriously love what you do to be able to play this game. I'm about to be on an eighteen-game in a row without an off day. So you've really got to love it to want to play it.

**Are there any significant roadblocks you've had to overcome through this whole process of being a player?**

High school generally gets hard like that, so just keep working. I was an under-the-radar player in a lot of ways so I just needed to keep working until I got the opportunity to come play pro-ball, and I'm trying to get the most out of it. So just don't give up. Just because I'm not as high as a first-rounder or anything like that, it motivates me to want to work harder so that I actually play.

**What are your goals going forward in your career?**

I just want to make it into the Major Leagues, of course. I want to be the best I can be and hope that I can have no regrets with anything I do.

# CHAPTER 8

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## STEVE SPARKS

Drafted: 1987 by Milwaukee Brewers (5<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: MLB

**What is your earliest baseball memory?**

Wow, that's a good question. I have a brother that was 5 years older than me and he was always into all the sports, particularly baseball. I was the bat boy for his team, and I was just always tagging along with my brother. That's where I feel like I kind of formed that love of baseball; just trying to be like my brother, wanting to be around my brother as much as I could, and being around some of those older guys was just a big thrill back then. Also I remember just loving some of the weekly television broadcasts, just one game a week back then. I think without the saturation, it made you crave baseball that much more when you got the chance to see it once a week when I was a kid. I just dreamed of being out there like those guys, and it seemed like an outlandish dream, but it was one that I held onto my whole life.

**What was high school baseball like for you?**

Well, let me tell you, I was mostly an infielder. I ended up being a pitcher as a professional, but mostly I just played infield and played the three sports: basketball, baseball, and football. Baseball was just the sport I always loved more than anything. I had a morning paper route from third grade until I went to college, and at least half a month's earnings would go to baseball cards. It's just what I loved and always wanted to do. I didn't have any scholarship offers coming out of high school though, so I decided to walk-on at a junior college in Oklahoma, and I played a couple of years there. I didn't really have any significant offers to play past then, so I walked-on at a place called Sam Houston State University. It's further south of Oklahoma where I lived, and I wanted to get to some better weather, a warmer climate, and that's when I started pitching. I started pitching my junior year out of necessity. I was afraid that I

was going to get cut and there were walk-on tryouts, so I told them I was a pitcher at the last moment, and that started my career as a pitcher.

**When you pitched at Sam Houston, how long did it take before scouts started watching you?**

I think it was in the fall of my senior year. They were taking a look every once in a while, but I was just a relief pitcher. Then we had a couple of guys not make their grades after that first semester my senior year – a couple of starting pitchers – so I got an opportunity to start, and then just kind of spot started, but I ended up pitching pretty well and started to develop, because as a starter you get the chance to throw more pitches and develop your other pitches. That's when the scouts started to notice me. I ended up having a decent senior year there and got drafted in the fifth round by the Milwaukee Brewers after my senior year. Right before the draft, I knew there were a handful of teams that were interested, and everybody was saying that I was probably going to get drafted anywhere from the fourth to the seventh round, and I ended up getting chosen by Milwaukee in the fifth.

**What did it feel like on that day to be drafted? Explain your thought process.**

It's kind of strange. Obviously going into my senior year I didn't know if I was going to get the chance to play professionally. One of the things that the scout told me is that only maybe 4% of the guys who ended up getting drafted or playing professionally, actually make it to the big leagues. It's usually the guys that out-work and out-prepare the other guys that end up climbing through the ranks. So that stuck with me in the back of my head throughout my Minor League career.

**What can you remember about your first day of professional baseball?**

I remember it was Helena, Montana, and there were about 35 guys on our team. You didn't have roster constructions back then, in 1987. I just remember watching guys throw their bullpen work, and I was just trying to size myself up against some of the other guys, seeing if I had what it took to compete against guys who were from all around the country, like Auburn University, and all of these bigger schools that were highly acclaimed. I just wanted to go out there the first few times and see if my work, or my stuff worked as good as guys from all around the country, for that first time. It's exciting when you first get an opportunity to excel in some of those moments, so it gives you a lot of confidence that you will be able to compete.

**How were you treated when you were new to Helena; were you hazed at all by fellow players, or was it a smooth transition?**

You know, the transition is kind of strange. Technically, when guys get drafted, the way that teams treat guys is based on how much money they have invested in them. So there were 45 rounds back then in the draft, maybe even more, but there are just 30 rounds now. So when they have more invested in you, they're going to try to give you the most opportunity, like pitchers that draft a little bit higher usually go into the rotation so you'll get more meaningful innings during the course of the season. So that's kind of the way it worked out; a lot of the guys that are drafted lower have to earn every opportunity that they get, just with performance.

I think some of the guys that were drafted the first few rounds had a little more leeway, so they might get to work

through some problems because the teams have money invested in them. And as far as the players go, it's just the normal hijinks you know? The clubhouse is something you have to get acclimated to. The guys, and you never know who they'll be, but there are guys that obviously were raised differently from you, from different countries and all that, so everybody just kind of learns for the first time what it's like to be around people from different cultures. Some people are treated differently and act differently, so it's an eye-opener for sure.

**Did you ever get in major conflicts with fellow players and coaches?**

I didn't personally, but I always saw, for instance, when you're in a small environment like a locker room, buses, or whatever, most times guys are tired and, in cases of long bus rides, starting to get agitated. So there are verbal exchanges sometimes, and it gets physical from time to time. Typically though, guys keep it in-house and they can learn how to handle it. It's almost like having brothers. You end up having conflicts from time to time and you get over it. You just learn – especially guys I think – how to just kind of get past some of that stuff, and I think a lot of people probably think that when you're on a team everybody likes each other, but that's not always the case. And that's okay, you know, you just have to learn how to get along with each other. You don't have to like all the guys. But I think for good teams, you have to learn how to trust guys, train with guys who get their work done, and everybody's pulling in the same direction so you can have better success as a team.

**What were your goals when you started your professional career, and how did those change as you progressed through the levels?**

I think initially I was very excited to be able to get a chance to play professionally. I think that in itself already met a goal, and after that first year I decided, man, I wanted to get to the Major Leagues in three years. And if not, I had my degree and wanted to probably pursue something else, but I ended up getting married just a couple of years into my Minor League career, and my wife was very supportive, which was a luxury. A lot of players who had girlfriends or were married didn't like that time apart, or didn't like the struggle that you had to go through because you didn't make very much money. I think that sometimes those relationships caused guys to abandon their dreams.

But my wife helped me a lot with moral support, and she'd always get a job with some of the little Minor League teams, so we were just kind of both living that dream together, and at that point we were just taking it year by year, just hoping that I could improve enough to go to the next level.

**Was it tough maintaining a relationship with your wife while playing professional ball?**

Well, you just learn a lot about communication, and things of that nature. I think for me, the biggest thing I learned was, that when we were apart, to realize that she needed somebody to talk to and to be able to trust and know where I was. So what I did, I just learned she wanted conversation; she didn't really care what it was. I mean, it could be something that I thought sounded boring to her, but she needed that. So I would always tell her what I did during the course of the day, and talk about our relationship. Even when I was tired, once I learned how to get through some of those things, I think that that made her feel better about our relationship, because we constantly just tried to communicate with each other through it.

**How is each level of professional ball different from the levels that precede it?**

Well, there's usually a pretty big difference in each of them. The way it formulates at the beginning is that there are a lot of guys coming out of high school, playing against guys coming out of college. So there's a big difference there. So those younger guys are taking a lot more lumps, unless they're just crazy talented like a Ken Griffey Jr. type of guy that comes out of high school and is tearing it up right away. But typically there are a lot of lumps because they're adjusting to learning how to live away from home and doing a lot of things off the field that can be distracting. I'd say from Rookie ball, when you get to A-ball you start seeing more college guys, and guys in their low twenties. I think the biggest jump was from the A-ball level to AA, where there are typically a lot of pretty good prospects, especially high-end prospects in the pitching department. You start to learn, at each level, that you can get away with fewer and fewer mistakes. Guys can hit mistakes more easily in each level you go up. And when you get to the Major Leagues it's a situation where you may get lucky every once in a while, when a guy will foul back or miss a pitch that's not located well, but it doesn't happen very often. Then you realize how fast the game gets at each level; quicker and quicker, and guys have more range, and the ball's just flying around a lot faster. The ball's coming off the bats quicker – the game speeds up. But the more and more you play at that level, the more it slows down. It slows down because you get into the flow, I think, mentally, and I think that you start to learn how to breathe and relax a little bit, where your mind doesn't race. You're able to slow things down mentally and that helps you perform better physically.

**When did you start throwing a knuckleball, and why did you decide to do that?**

I was at the AA level with Milwaukee's organization and I was kind of stalling out at that level. I wasn't doing well in AA with my conventional stuff, the fastball, curve, slider, and changeup, and they felt like I could be a good candidate for a knuckleball even though I'd never thrown one, because my mechanics were simple. And above anything else, I think a knuckleball pitch is about temperament, for a particular pitcher, it plays a big role in that. You can't be really high-strung because you don't want to over-throw that pitch. You have to be relaxed enough to throw it in tough counts like 3-0, 3-1, 2-0 and things like that. So they felt like I may be a good candidate so they came to me with the idea of throwing it, and they did a 3-year plan. So you think back to A-ball and they want you to throw it 30% the first year, 50% the second year, and then 70% the third year and kind of just kind of gauge where we were at, at that point in time. And by that time, I was at AAA, knocking at the door of getting my first call-up to the Major Leagues.

**What was your experience like while traveling with road games, especially in the minors; the hotels? the food? the lifestyle?**

Well, the thing that sticks out more than anything back when I was coming up, was that it was really hard to find places to work out. You know, you weren't going on the road, but on the road you find some place where you could maintain your strength during the course of the year. Now it's a little bit different, the Minor League ball parks are nicer and they have setups where guys can work out. Back when I was playing, nobody had that. So you'd get around \$18 a day to play, so you were always going the fast food

route and trying to save money, because you weren't making much. By the seventh year I was playing professional baseball, which is the most I've made, and I made \$8,500 for the entire season before taxes. So it's a really tough ride. You scrape by, you know. You're living in apartments with four or five guys and you're putting together some sandwiches and just trying to get by. Every once in a while, some fans would give you a couple of coupons to a restaurant. That was like gold to us guys, just trying to eat, survive, and keep our strength up. It was also very tiring with the traditional overnight travel. You would get to a hotel, but you have a roommate with maybe a different sleeping schedule than you, and you're just trying to make ends meet when you can get a little bit of sleep, a little something to eat before you get to the ballpark every day. Typically, in the Minor Leagues, it's all about development, so you're trying to get to the field early and get in a lot of early work with your instructors.

**You mentioned before about sharing an apartment sometimes with four or five guys. What was your experience like with roommates? Did you ever have a bad roommate?**

I don't really think I did, to be honest with you. Everybody had their own level of messiness, or sloppiness or whatever. Some guys wouldn't clean their dishes, and things would get a little bit disgusting from time to time, but other than that, it was just small stuff that you just learn to live with. You just pick up the slack or somebody else's and you just get used to it. You get to living – or cohabitating – this space the way you are. But it's inconsequential really, everybody's just kind of having a good time, learning about life, and learning how to get better as players so we could all rise through the ranks and hopefully be major-leaguers together.

**Was there ever a moment in which you wanted to quit, and if so, how did you overcome that?**

Yeah, there definitely was. I know there were certainly times when I was frustrated – or I wasn't getting better. I was getting worse at times, particularly with the knuckleball. But yeah, I think getting back to my wife, you know, she was so supportive that she never really made me feel like abandoning – at least trying, and working through those situations. She actually even enjoyed moving to some of those small towns and getting to see different parts of the country and things like that, so it made it fun for both of us. We enjoyed each other's company and good times where we made some of our best friends to this day, coming up through the Minor Leagues. So there's more of an enjoyment time. I mean you get frustrated with failure, there's a lot of failure involved with baseball, but once you realize that part of it and control your attitude, your concentration, your effort level, those were kind of the main things for me.

**Do you think there is one singular greatest failure or lowest moment you had as a player?**

There are a lot. I mean, you go through your entire career, especially for me who wasn't gifted physically, and you meet some people who can't do this, but I always felt like mentally I could get myself through some situations, even without really good stuff because I could change speeds, or my pitches, and do things where I could get myself out of focus until I kind of righted the ship, so to speak. I think there are probably five or six specific times. Maybe my last year in the Major Leagues was kind of a low point, because I was on a veteran-laden team, I was forty years old with the Arizona Diamondbacks, and the team switched directions a couple months into the season. They fired their

manager, Bob Brenly. They decided to go real young, so the situation for the second half of the season was that I only pitched a few times, so that was a little frustrating.

**How did you regain your composure when you were off your game on the mound?**

There is this technique where I felt like, mentally, you learn as you go. You just try to simplify things as much as possible. But somebody told me along the way that you treat practice like a game. That way when you get into the game, you can almost treat it like practice and relax because you know you're well-prepared. So I just tried to prepare as best as I could, and I think that's where confidence comes from. I don't think confidence really comes from your results, because I think results can lie to players a lot of times. And I think that when guys rely on the results for confidence, that's when the extended slumps come into play, whether you're a pitcher or a hitter. The propensity is to make a good pitch, and a guy can get a hit – a soft hit – you know. So you don't gauge how well you executed that pitch just because he got kind of a lucky hit, or things of that nature. Sometimes the guy, as a hitter, can hit the ball hard four times and get nothing to show for it, be 0-4 because he hit it right at people. So I think once you learn how to gain confidence and prepare the right way, I think that's when you'll start to take strides.

**What was the highest moment of your career, or a moment you were most proud of?**

I think in August of 2000 I got on a pretty good roll, and I think it was five consecutive starts in that month where I felt like I was pitching very well. I ended up being the American League Pitcher of the Month that month. Also, we were playing pretty well as a team, and it was a team

that wasn't expected to do very well, but we got into the Wild Card race with the Detroit Tigers that year and, August of 2000, I felt like I was a part of that team getting back into the race, because I pitched so well.

**What did it feel like to play on the biggest stage in the world and win AL Pitcher of the Month? Did you ever dream that you would get there?**

I dreamt of it, but real deep in the recesses of my brain I probably felt like it was a long shot. I always dreamed of being able to see just what it would feel like to be in front of that many people and playing in some of those stadiums. And a lot of times, it was a situation where, in the course of a particular game, I would kind of be in a bubble as far as my mind goes. Things would get pretty quiet. But those moments when I was shagging flies during batting practice; getting a chance at old Tiger Stadium or Yankee Stadium, and being able to shag and watch the people come into the ballpark right when they opened the gates, and realizing how lucky I was to be out there wearing that Major League uniform...it would really kick in at those moments.

**What injuries did you deal with throughout your career, and what was that like?**

I dislocated my left shoulder – my non-throwing shoulder – 15 times. So...the sixth time I did it was a bit infamous, and I did it trying to rip a phonebook in our clubhouse in spring training one year. A group had come to our spring training site the day before, and the group was called Radical Reality. They were a group of guys that did motivational speaking and they would bend bars with their teeth, they would fold up frying pans with their hands, and they would fill up hot water bottles and make them explode. Another thing they did was rip phonebooks. We

had a rain delay the next day. We were just talking about what those guys did, so we got some phonebooks and we were trying to see how they got that started. We figured it would get a little bit easier once you get started. So, lo and behold, I got mine started, so I stood up and I was kind of hamming it up in front of some of my teammates, and ended up dislocating my left shoulder for the sixth time and had to go back to the Minor Leagues for another year because of it. Ended up being – still is – in the Top Ten Stupidest Sports Injuries of the Century. But as soon as somebody does something crazy, gets some sports injury, those lists come back out again and I'm always in there.

**How did playing professional baseball change your perception of the sport?**

You know, you learn that guys are just normal. As a kid growing up, you think of these guys as more than just a regular person. You realize guys have insecurities and are full of doubts just like anybody else, and they're just as fallible. So once you get into that Major League clubhouse, you start to realize that guys are very special in that matter, but just people as individuals. Everybody is a little bit different and they all have their same insecurities that anybody else does, just like you and me.

**Have you ever, or seen anybody do steroids?**

Never have seen anybody do it. I suspected several teammates and people around the league were. When I was playing, because that was so prevalent in those years, it was pretty noticeable. Some guys were doing it and we knew it was a problem, so we were just glad the game finally kind of caught up to some of that stuff where they can clean it up. I'll tell you what, as a broadcaster right now, going down to the clubhouse, you see people in uniform



conducting drug tests every single day before and after the game, pulling out six or seven guys every single day to keep it monitored, so I think Major League Baseball is doing a great job on it.

**How severely do you think steroid users should be punished?**

Well, I don't know the science behind it, but I realize there's a possibility of somebody taking something that's not on the Major League prescribed list that's approved. Things have to be approved for guys to be able to take it nowadays. And I could understand if a guy maybe makes a mistake and takes something that shows up in the sample to make it tainted. So I'd say after the first time, I kind of like the rule with the 80 games, and then after that, I'd say by strike two you're out of baseball.

Someone was actually suspended today, Nate Schierholtz. He was suspended for 80 games. You know, it's always going to be a situation where guys are still going to try to beat the system at some point. It's like that in every walk of life, and I think it's just something they have to deal with, and that's why they have those strict drug testing policies in place.

**Did it make you angry as a player when you knew your fellow players were doing well by cheating?**

Not really, well, maybe just a little bit. I never even thought about doing it, but maybe a little bit in passing I would think, every once in a while, that it felt like things weren't fair. But outside of that, I didn't dwell on it. I didn't feel like there was anything I could do, so I didn't really want to waste my time thinking about it too much.

**As a pitcher, what do you think of the designated hitter; do you want to see it stay or go?**

I don't like watching pitchers hit, to be honest with you. I think if I was a fan, and I know there are some purists out there that like the art of the bunt, moving guys along, but in those situations, in the National League games, usually the eight-hole hitter gets pitched to so much differently because they're pitching around that guy to get to the pitcher anyway. So you really take two guys out of the equation and line-up, so the line-up is easily seven deep. To be honest with you as a fan, I really wouldn't be too interested in seeing less offense. I think the game – and the world – has gotten to a point where we'd like to see action and I like that we may be there.

**Did you have any baseball superstitions?**

Not really. I know I always had a routine. I think routine helps guys prepare better because they feel like they are doing things the same way. But if something worked and something didn't work, or whatever, I would change those things up. But I had nothing specifically as far as superstitions go.

**What's your favorite hobby other than baseball? What do you like to do for fun?**

Right now it's golf, but when I was coming up I could never afford to play golf through the Minor Leagues, or growing up, and maybe two or three years toward the end of my Major League career I started playing a little bit. Since I retired I've enjoyed golf. It's just such a nice athletic challenge. It's part mental, part physical, but always different every time you go out there. So I enjoy golf.

**What was your favorite and least favorite thing about being a baseball player, and why?**

Definitely when my kids got to the stage when they started school and I was away from them for a good portion of the summer, that was the worst part about it. I really got torn my last couple years, being away from my kids and missing some of the activities. Once they got a little bit older they were playing softball, baseball, or some other sports and I wasn't getting a chance to be there for them. So I felt very torn, and being torn in terms of performance at the Major League level is very hard. You have to be all-in, you know. It's almost a selfish profession, I'm sorry to say. Some are born with it, they are the best of the best, but for most it's a physical and mental preparedness job each day. And the best part, obviously, is getting a chance to compete against the best players in the world and getting a chance to fulfill a dream. I think it was just a lot of fun for all my family and friends that followed me. It was fun to be able to connect and talk to them, with my parents being able to follow me on the Major Leagues page.

**Has being a professional baseball player affected your love of the game?**

No, not at all. I think it has enhanced it. I love the little nuances of the game, and being a broadcaster now, having maybe 19 years of professional experience, just getting a chance to point out some of the nuances – the little things – that maybe the casual observer wouldn't be able to see if they hadn't been out there in that type of a situation. There are just really little movements from a hitter that you notice, which would cause him not to be able to cover the whole plate with their swing, and pitchers' mechanics, I liked those things for radio. You know, it's probably easier to illustrate some of the things on a telestrator, say on

television, but the challenge of being able to try to do that with words is fun for me.

**Tell me more about your job broadcasting with the Astros. What is that like and how is that different from your playing career?**

Well, the travel is exactly the same as the playing career. You probably get to the field an hour or two later, but catchers and pitchers all park around two o'clock, and you just get a chance to be in both sides' clubhouses and talk to players and see what they're working on, getting to know them as people. You try to relay that to people as much as possible and learn how to use your words to paint a picture for somebody who's sitting in their car. It's just a thrill for me. You know, I recognize that's how I started to love baseball when I was a kid, from hearing people talk about it. I guess if you show some genuine excitement and describe it well, I think you can really help people latch onto what you're trying to tell them, what you're trying to describe. I find it a great challenge every night to try to be prepared and put on a pretty good show for the people that like to listen to the Astros games.

**If you could go back in time, what would you tell your former self as you were starting your professional career?**

I'd probably say to try to learn as much as I could mentally about the game early on. There is something specific that I probably didn't learn until about fifteen years into my professional career; how to train my mind to be able to concentrate on the task at hand. A perfect example, I remember specifically, was pitching at Fenway Park in Boston. I remember just about to release the baseball at the top of my delivery, when I was wondering if my wife and

kids were in town, and I was wondering if they had gotten to the gate yet. This was while I was pitching in a Major League game. It was in there. I just knew that everybody's mind is kind of strange and hard to control. What I've learned later on is, once you got to a specific point, like once I got my signs from the catcher, then I'd take a deep breath and I'd get into a little routine. I would repeat something over and over, usually a two- or three-word little mantra. Like for me it was "hit the glove." So I tried to be really specific with that, and once I changed that, added in the stretch or whatever, I would just repeat "hit the glove" over and over and over so nothing else could pop into my mind.

# CHAPTER 9

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## MIKE PROCHASKA

Drafted: 2002 by Tampa Bay Devil Rays (16<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: AAA

**What is your earliest baseball memory?**

My earliest baseball memory is my dad taking me to a Minor League game at the Jacksonville Suns Stadium in Jacksonville, Florida. We would play in the yard. My dad played a little bit of Minor League ball with the Dodgers organization. So I have grown up around baseball from a very young age. When I was born, my dad put a cotton ball into my hand and kind of threw it to himself, just a few hours after I was born. So I guess he really was pushing me to play this sport when I was born.

**What was high school baseball like for you?**

High school baseball was fun, but extremely competitive. When I came up playing in high school, I was fortunate enough to make the varsity team as a freshman. It was really, really fun, because we had some of the top players in the country in our area. I grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina and went to Leesville Road High School. Some of our rivals were guys like Josh Hamilton, who played for Athens Drive, so I competed against Josh Hamilton every year and played with and against him.

Every high school team that was in our division, it seemed, had at least two or three Division I guys, or guys that were drafted. So competition was extreme and we were just battling each other out, so it's not often that that type of competition comes along. You have a team that's loaded and they go really far, but our high school was so competitive. You never knew who was going to win the next game, because everybody had at least two or three Division I guys on their team.

**With all that talent around you, did the scouting process start in high school for you or was it more in college?**

I can't really remember at what age I started getting recruited and getting letters. The process has changed since I was in high school. I would say, during sophomore year I started getting some interest from some smaller schools. Then junior year once schools could contact you, I narrowed it down. I took my five-digits to the University of Georgia, Arizona State University, and North Carolina State in Raleigh. Tennessee was recruiting me hard and so was South Carolina. I was lucky enough to be recruited by a lot of the top big schools, and I just narrowed it down. To be honest with you, I wanted to go to Arizona State really bad. I went on a visit there and they wanted me to hold out a little bit longer, but I had some other offers on the table that I was nervous I was going to lose. So it was kind of my dream to go to ASU, but I ended up going to N.C. State and had a great, great experience there.

**What motivated your decision to go to college after being drafted in high school?**

That's a great question, and being older now looking back, it was the best decision I could have made. Being young, eighteen, and drafted in the eleventh round by the Minnesota Twins, I was on top of the world. I thought nothing else mattered, that I was going to be a big leaguer, and this was the greatest thing ever. But I think at the time I got \$35,000 as my signing bonus and back then I was looking for something to make it worthwhile. I was thinking that I didn't care for school too much, but I didn't think that amount was really going to help me out too much. So I asked for more money, held out all summer, but

it never came back. So I decided that was fine, I'd go to college, and that was the process of how that started.

**When you got drafted, what did that feel like, what was your mindset, and what went through your mind?**

It was one of the best days of my life at that time, obviously. I remember sitting around at home, my family was there, and we were listening to it on the internet. Then there were phone calls. I think the Colorado Rockies called and said, "Hey, we're going into the seventh round and we'll pick you if you'll sign," and I mean, of course I said, "Hell yeah!" It was just so chaotic. If you can imagine, this was a dream come true. That day was just so over the top. It was cool. And then the seventh round comes and goes, then the eighth round, ninth round, tenth round. You're just a ball of nerves and then the 11th round came, and the Minnesota Twins called. I had been talking to those scouts too. So that was how that happened.

**How was college baseball different from high school ball?**

Great question, because growing up I was lucky enough to play against some great competition. I think that was the key, to play against tougher competition than what you're capable of. That pushes you to be better. I was never a cocky player, I was taught from my dad to just show it on the field, don't ever run your mouth. But going into college, obviously there was a little nervousness there. The reason I picked NC State was because they were going to allow me to play first base and outfield, and also pitch, while the other colleges were wanting me to just be a pitcher.

I really like hitting so that was the big reason I went there. I remember on my first day on the mound there, I was used to being able to rear back and throw a fastball by somebody 0 and 2. And really it didn't matter in high school... you could blow it by most guys, and it didn't matter if you left it up. But my first time 0 and 2 I reared back and threw it to a guy, and he just took me way deep and that moment right then I said, "Well okay, this is a different level." So that was my day one lesson learned, and I knew I had to learn how to pitch and succeed with more strategy.

**After you signed with the Rays, do you remember what your first day of professional baseball was like?**

I do, and I will never forget this. So, they send you down and I remember flying out. I packed my stuff up in two duffel bags, and that was all I had for the whole season. I had no clue where I was going or what to expect. I went down there and checked into the team hotel and then went to get my orders. I had to room with somebody I didn't know from Alabama and try to get to know him, so that was really an exciting night. When the next morning came, I went downstairs and caught the van. But I had no idea that there are different vans at different times and I got on the van with all the newly signed Dominican players that didn't speak a lick of English. So I was the only white guy on the van, and there are all these Dominican guys looking at me, and they are all talking in Spanish. I could tell that they were just talking shit and making fun of me. I have no idea, but that was pretty intimidating, because here you are playing, and these are guys who have said they would literally kill somebody to be in that spot. If they would get released, they would have nothing left. They would go home to poverty, so that was really an interesting experience.

I also remember getting there and going through the physical and all that stuff, but then going out there are always little satellite games going on in spring training. I remember watching some of these guys pitch, and they were just bringing the heat, at like 95. And I was just very naive. I came up in the steroid era, but I just had no idea. I had never experienced it or been exposed, and I was almost clueless. I can honestly say I never did anything performance enhancing. But at that time, I guess all these guys were doing it.

So these guys were just throwing these mid 90's, like 93, 94, and I was like, "What am I even doing here? I can't compete, I can't throw this hard." I remember asking myself what in the hell I was doing here, because those guys were just going so hard. So that was my first day, and needless to say it was pretty exciting, but it was scary as well.

**What was that like, knowing others around you were doing steroids? Did it make you angry knowing they were cheating at the game when you were trying so hard to prove yourself?**

To be honest with you, I had no idea. Nobody ever talked about it. Of course, you knew what those were and stuff, but I'd never been around any of that. I wasn't sheltered by any means, but I just had never been around anybody that did or talked about it. I could never understand, because I would work really hard in the off season and come into spring training every year thinking I'm in shape. Then I'd see these guys come in and they would take their shirts off, and you almost hardly recognized them. I was like, "How in the world did you get that ripped up?" And they'd say, "Oh I hired a strength coach," or "I gained 20 pounds of

muscle." I thought, "How the hell are they doing that?" I had no idea.

Looking back now, I realize that they were doing steroids. Once I realized what was going on, yes, it made me mad, because I thought gosh, if I did that, I could probably throw 95 as a lefty, and I'd have had a good shot at making the big leagues.

But I was raised knowing right from wrong, and I knew that wasn't right, and so it never even crossed my mind. I always told myself that if I wasn't good enough to get to the big leagues without performance enhancing, then I would be fine with that. And to this day, I know if I have kids and if they ever asked me, I could look them in the face and be honest with them.

**How were you treated when you were new to Hudson Valley? Were you hazed at all? Or was it a pretty smooth transition from college?**

It was pretty smooth, because Hudson Valley was more of a level for guys that went to college. Of course there were guys that signed out of high school, but there was a level below that which is Princeton, which is Rookie ball. So a lot of the guys that I was with were college guys, almost like a college all-star team if you will, with some guys sprinkled in that were high school guys that maybe had been with Tampa Bay for about two years or so. So it was good, I mean the camaraderie, and it's everybody's first year of playing and everybody is just amped up and you're in pro ball so that was really good. I'll be honest, every team that I played on, no matter what, it was almost like a fraternity and you become really good friends with the guys. You basically live and fight with them every day, because we played so many games.

**What was that fraternity setting like, being with those guys?**

In Hudson Valley we lived with host families, because we barely made enough money to even get by and it was in New York, so the cost of living was high. So we all lived with host families, but we were pretty much, most of the time, with everybody in the locker room. So if you're with people every day that are doing the same thing as you, you just become really close, and you make good friends. I still talk to guys that I played with in Hudson Valley. I would consider them best friends, I would trust them with my life. From that team is where I got some of the most solid lifelong friendships. I can name several guys that I still talk to that were on that team. But we were on the road, we were looking out for each other, and we just got really close. We would go out together, chase girls at the time, and that was before we were married. It's just like being in school and being with a group of friends, so we got really close in a short period of time. As we worked our way up the Minor League systems, a lot of those guys were part of that too.

**How was each level of the minors different from the one that precedes it; what's different and what changes when you move up?**

Every level is obviously harder and when I was drafted, I was just a pitcher. I didn't hit at all anymore. So in the Hudson Valley level, if the pitcher gets ahead of a hitter, and you bury the third or fourth pitch, you can get guys to chase pitches, and if you strike the guy out, and find his hitter's weakness, at the lower levels those hitters are not going to make adjustments. As the pitcher, you just keep exposing their weakness, and most of the time if you can throw it where you want to throw it, you'll have success.

But as you moved up to that next level, and the higher you go, I really noticed a big difference between Hudson Valley and Charleston, South Carolina, which was full season Low-A. I had a lot of success at most of those levels. I even had great success and made the All-Star team at A. But even in those three levels, you could tell a difference, because if you struck a guy out on one pitch, the next time around he's going to make the adjustment. So it just gets tighter and tighter the higher you go.

Now, I ran into a big issue when I got to AA because I really was a two-pitch, maybe a three-pitch pitcher. But at the AA level as a starter, you've got to have a better off-speed pitch, and I had a fastball and a curveball, but you really need a changeup. I would say my changeup was mediocre, because I really didn't need it at a lower levels and in college I got away with the two pitches. Once I got to AA, those hitters capitalize on mistakes, so I went through a period where I struggled big-time and then the next year I actually got sent back to High-A to start the year off, because I needed to go back to work on my changeup. So I did that, developed a decent changeup, and got back to AA. And between there, I worked my way up to AA and AAA, back and forth for a couple of seasons.

**What is it like being a Minor League player on the road? What are the hotels, food, and conditions like? Does that change as you progress to another level?**

I remember at Hudson Valley when we would go on road trips, we rarely spent the night, because they were pretty close; each team was close by. But they would order subs for us from Subway, and they were placing the order before we left. Then we wouldn't eat until after the game that night on our bus ride home, so the subs would be like, nasty and soggy. I think they took five or ten bucks a piece from

us. So that was that, and the host families we lived with would feed us breakfast, or lunch, or dinner some days, if we ate.

So a lot of times we ate on the road. There is a lot of fast food after games until you get to like AA and AAA and they have some decent meals for you. Each team has their own clubhouse manager that has food after games for you, even in the lower levels, except Hudson Valley, they do. And you're expected to pay dues and one of the toughest things when I got to AAA was even though I was still under my Minor League contract, I wasn't making a lot of money. So dues were like, \$12 to \$15 a day, plus you're expected to tip, so that's at every home stand, you may have four games at home. You owe that plus a tip. And then you go on the road for six days and you have to owe that guy \$12 plus tip.

So it really became... tough. We weren't making a lot of money, but the greatest thing about being in AAA, and even sometimes AA, was if a Major League player would come down who was rehabbing, it's kind of an unwritten rule that the big league guy would buy dinner for the team while he's there. So if he was there for five days, one night he's going to pick, and a lot of guys would do Outback Steakhouse and they'd buy steaks for all of us. So we would always love it when a big league guy would come down for rehab, because we knew we were going to eat well that night. But there's a lot of pizzas being ordered, you're just eating shit food, because you just eat whatever is cheapest.

**What were your goals when you started your career, and how did those change from year to year?**

My goal obviously was to make it to the big leagues. That was my lifelong dream and everything. Then getting into pro ball, that's still your goal and you just do whatever it takes to survive. Guys show up to the field if there's something that you need work on, like a certain pitch or your mechanics. After a while and playing a lot, you just find a way to survive, whether that be sandpaper or Vaseline on the ball, or something to give you an extra edge, so we'd come up with all kinds of stuff to get a little bit of extra movement on the ball or something.

**Did any of that even work?**

Yeah, you hang around some veteran guys, who have been around in a game a lot, and some of them are pitching coordinators who pitched back in the 70s and 80s where they stuffed balls up, and you learn to put piece of sandpaper in your glove or in your hat or something. You just kind of weather up the ball, and you get a little bit more movement.

**What was your experience with roommates, did you ever have a bad roommate or was it pretty smooth throughout?**

I was fortunate to have good roommates. The tough thing is that you rent apartments, and so each season you may get called up, or you may get sent down. I remember a situation where a guy that um... I don't mind naming him but I probably shouldn't because if you publish this he'll probably call me up. Well, he ended up making it into the big leagues as a pitcher and he gave up Derek Jeter's 3,000<sup>th</sup> hit, so you can figure out who it was. Anyway, I was in AA and got called up to AAA and we had driven to the field that day, but I left when I got called up on the road. I had to fly out from Mobile, so he drove me and then



I gave him my keys to drive himself home. Well, he was dating a girl in a different state, we had an off day, and I found out that he drove my truck to visit her. And then I found out he was driving my truck the whole time I was in AAA!

We were pretty desperate back then, so I can't be mad at him, but that's kind of how it was with roommates, you get what you get and some roommates were good, some roommates were bad.

You have a lot of responsibility when you're playing Minor League ball, because you have to pay for your apartment bills and all that stuff, on time. If a guy gets called up, you're stuck with having to fill that spot, so you pretty much hoped whoever was coming up was going to be a good guy, because they're stuck with moving in to that empty spot. So there's a lot of stress on top of that too.

**What was the biggest roadblock of your career? Was there ever a moment you wanted to quit and if so what was it like having to overcome that?**

Yes, there was a time. I never understood guys who finally said I'm tired of the game, I'm over it, I lost my desire to play. I never understood that, until I actually got to a situation like this. I was in AA, and I played several seasons in AA, but I want to say it was like 2006. I was doing okay, I'd have some good starts, bad starts, and just really going through an up and down time. I was not consistent at all, and I'd have some good games and bad games. So there's this list called the Phantom DL, which anybody playing Minor League ball knows about. It's the disabled list they'll put people on if they need to make room for roster spots. So, I was the designated Phantom DL guy. I was put on the fake hurt list, and was off the roster

for a couple of weeks. For a couple of weeks, I'm going geez... am I ever going to make it? I started to just doubt myself and wasting my time and this and that. So, that's why I started thinking... I don't know, should I hang them up? I just really had a tough time mentally and kind of had a talk with my pitching coach, Neil Allen, who is actually now the pitching coach for the Minnesota Twins big league team.

Neil was just awesome, he really knew how to mentally bring us back up. He pitched in the big leagues, and overcame a lot of adversity in life too, so he was a good guy to talk to. He actually revamped my whole mechanics and pitching style. He said I think you're just overthrowing the ball and when you're missing, you're missing *up*. He told me he wanted to try something, and he's like, we're going to put you back on, you're going to start next week, and I don't want you to overthrow one pitch. I don't even want you to try to throw hard, and he goes I've already got Tampa to understand that this is an experiment so you're not going get 'dinged' if you have a bad outing, but I just want you to believe in yourself don't overthrow if it happens. And I shit you not, that next game I pitched a complete game shutout for the Mobile Baybears. I came off the field, and it is one of the best games I've ever pitched in my life. He said I think we found your strength, and he goes, "Do you trust in me to listen and keep doing this?" And I said, "Neil you could tell me to freaking do a back flip into a river without water, and I'll listen to you." From that point on I just tore the rest of that half of the season up, and I actually got invited to go and play in Arizona Fall League which was one of the best things that could have ever happened to me. There were some ups and downs and Neil really helped me dig out of that, and there were some tough times but we made it through there... but then eventually I got to a point where I was 28 years old, and I

was in AAA and I was pitching really good. I think I had six or seven starts where I was over a 2 ERA, which is great.

And then I remember three guys getting sent down from the big leagues, so they had to make room, and they sent me down. I'm like, "What do I have to do? I'm pitching great and I'm AAA, and I have like a 2 ERA," and really a little over that. That's when I first knew that I was really not looked at as a prospect. I was doing good things, but I really just got down again. And then being 28, and I was not on the 40-man roster, and you have to be on the 40-man roster to make it. If this is what my role was going to be, the guy getting sent down to AA when guys get sent down and then when they go back up, I'd come back up as AAA, I didn't like it. After a while, I just really got tired of it, and I knew that being 28, it was time to probably switch gears.

I started dating my wife who I'm still married to and I was like, I'm old. I'm probably going to look at hanging it up after this season. That's when I just decided that at the end of 2008, that was going to be my last year, and I actually got to start the last game of the season. And I always wanted to throw a knuckleball, and I told Neil Allen who was the AA coach, "You know, I'm going to throw a knuckleball. This is my last game I'm ever going to pitch," and he goes, "Fuck it, let's throw it." And so, believe it or not, I struck the lead-off hitter out working on a knuckleball to start the game. And it was like, all the guys in the dugout didn't think I was going to throw it, and I faced that hitter many times during the year, and he just looked at me and goes, "Where in the fuck did that come from? You haven't thrown that all year." It was really cool and I went on to give up two more home runs in that game and I think we lost or maybe we won, I don't know even know. But I was like, "You know what, I had the best time

pitching that day and that was a great way to end my career.

**Did you have to deal with any injuries throughout your career? If you did, what was that like?**

Luckily I stayed pretty healthy when I was in my professional career. I did have labrum surgery. I tore my labrum in my left shoulder in college my sophomore year. I honestly did not think I was going to get another shot at being drafted and playing professionally, because I had surgery. I came back after eleven months, but I really wasn't throwing hard, and I just wasn't healthy yet. I was healthy enough to pitch, but I didn't get my velocity back. It took me about two years to get that back, and then when I was drafted by Tampa Bay after my junior year there I just said, "I'm going to sign and I don't care what it's for," because I didn't think I'd have a shot at signing again. So luckily that was the only time that I have ever had any type of injury playing.

**Did you have any memorable conflicts with players or coaches throughout your career?**

Yes, I played with this guy named Elijah Dukes, and he was just a ball of fire, man, this guy could just set off anything. I remember plenty of times that this guy is chasing guys through the clubhouse with a baseball bat. He was crazy.

I do remember, specifically an outing that I had at AA. It was one of my worst outings ever, just terrible. I think I gave up like three home runs, or whatever that game, or seven earned runs. I got pulled out of the game and after that inning I went up to the clubhouse and I was just sitting there with my head in my hands going, gee, that was

terrible. And a manager came up and told me just what a horrible outing and what a pussy I was, that I had no spine and I sucked, blah, blah, blah. He started getting up in my chest and pushing me and like trying to egg me on to like fistfight him, this guy. And he was tough, but I stood up for myself, and there were chairs being thrown. The clubhouse managers had to come in. We were on the road so the visiting guy broke us apart.

We didn't talk for about a month and then after that he just apologized and was like, "We really need you, I'm sorry." So that happened but I'm really glad it happened. I know he didn't mean it, he just, he's currently in the big leagues as a coach and I have a huge amount of respect for him. He's a great coach, and he's got an amazing career. I almost I feel like I should thank him for doing that because even though you can't control bad outings, it just showed his passion for the game and it just really made me toughen up as a person. I mean you're going to have good games and bad games and it just helped me be a better person and work harder.

**Coming from the manager that's intense, crazy.**

Yes, it is, and you know, that life and those levels, it's live or die. It's tough for managers too, because everybody's under a microscope, and you can be so easily replaced in a matter of one phone call. There's always somebody ready to take your spot.

**What were some other crazy things that happened during your career? What stands out as you're looking back, as insane?**

I would say a funny or embarrassing story was when I went to play winter ball in Puerto Rico, and that was an honor to be asked to play winter ball in Puerto Rico, but when we

got there, there was a stretch hummer limousine waiting for us, and I'm like, "What the hell? Why do they want...?" I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" So I get in and we were waiting there, and there are couple more American guys, I think your last seven American guys... Reggie Abercombie was one of the guys there, he was in the big leagues so I knew him, you know, from watching them on TV and we're sitting there talking and this guy gets in and he's like 6'5", he's an older guy with a goatee, and it's got some grey in it. I'm like, "Who's this guy? He's not a baseball player." I reached out, shook his hand, and said, "Hey, I'm Mike Prochaska. Nice to meet you."

I swear to God I thought he said, John Muhammad. And I'm thinking to myself, who the hell is John Muhammad. What is this? And so as we get settled down and understand who everybody is, I realized it's John Halama, he's like a veteran left-handed big league guy who pitched for Tampa Bay and all these big league teams, and I just about fell out. So as I got to know him, we were all sitting around one night drinking some beer, so I said, "I just have to be honest with you, I have to tell you this story, and he fell down on the ground laughing so hard. I said could you imagine how embarrassed I was. But as I got to know him, after that he and I became such good friends, and we actually started calling him Mohammed for the rest of the time.

So it was freaking hilarious, I was so embarrassed, but I thank God I didn't say anything at the time about it. He wasn't a big star or anything, but being a left-handed pitcher myself, I knew who was in the big leagues for our big league team. And I used to watch him pitch and loved... idolized him. And I can't believe I didn't even realize who he was or recognize him.

**What do you think were the highest and lowest moments in your career?**

Lowest moments were probably, like I mentioned to you earlier, when I kept getting put on that Phantom DL and not playing, because I wasn't hurt, I just wasn't playing well. So when they don't need you, they put you on that list, and I couldn't play, so I just showed up and worked out and just sat there and watched games. That honestly was really tough.

Highest moment was being called up to AAA for the Durham Bulls, that was really special and having a chance to play for them, because that was my hometown so all my friends got the chance to come and see me play. I got to live at my parents' house when I was in Durham. That was the highlight, and I definitely would say playing in the Arizona Fall League.

**Did playing professional baseball change your perception of the sport at all?**

It did, I mean, that's something that a lot of guys would admit that's really different if you haven't played professional baseball, because when I decided to hang it up, a lot of my friends who didn't play that were very passionate about baseball, they just couldn't understand it. They're like, "You get paid to play baseball. How are you tired of it? How are you just going to give it up?" And when you've played it your whole life, I mean I played from age four until I was 28, it was always a passion and I loved it, but there just came a time when emotionally and physically, I just couldn't do it anymore. And you realize there are a lot more important things in life than a game, but it was a job.

It would just be like our parents going to work every day. Nobody really enjoyed going to work you know, and it became a job. I don't want to say it wasn't fun, because there were so many great memories and things that I did, because of baseball. It gave me a platform to do great things and meet great people, but regardless, at the end of the day it was a job, and it was a stressful job. Because if you did not succeed, you got fired. And luckily I was never released, I just chose to retire at the end of my six-year contract. Had I kept playing, I would've been released, and you can be replaced so easily. So that pressure just really wears on you. And to be honest with you, I could not even watch baseball for a couple years after I've stopped playing. Like if I saw a guy playing on TV and getting into trouble, like bases loaded, no outs, my chest almost felt like it was closing, because I remember what that was like and the pressure there. It really took me a long time to get back into it. Just in the last two years or so, I've really gotten back into watching it as a fan, but it took me a long time to get back into it.

**Was remembering the pressure what made it hard for you to watch? Or were there other reasons it was hard for you to watch baseball after you hung up your spikes?**

I was always okay with deciding to hang them up. I didn't have any regrets. I knew it was time, and I'm glad that after I considered hanging them up in 2006, that I stuck with it for two more years. I'm really glad I did, because I feel like if I would've done it then, I would have possibly regretted it, and I have a lot of friends that can't give it up. They just can't understand that they aren't still playing. They really struggle with it, and they're not succeeding in life with work and stuff, because they're just so hung up on it. I was

fine with it and I'm glad I made that decision. I was ready to move on.

**Who was your favorite player growing up?**

Pete Rose; I loved his hustle.

**What do you think about the designated hitter? Do you think it should stay around or are you fine with it going away?**

As a pitcher, I would have killed to have had a chance to hit. I understand it, but I really am opposed to it; I think the pitcher should hit.

**You mentioned starting to date your wife while you were playing. What was it like trying to maintain a relationship while you were a professional baseball player?**

That's a great question, because there's nothing easy about being in a relationship and being gone for at least six months. It was actually longer than six months usually, because I played winter ball in Puerto Rico. So we started dating a couple of months before spring training and she had no idea. I remember getting called up to a big league game in spring training, and I called my parents. It was against the Phillies, and so they drove down and they asked her if she wanted to go. Actually, she thought I'd play for like a church league, and she didn't even know that I was in the Minor Leagues, she had no clue. And then she got down there, and she realized, okay this isn't church league, this is like his job.

So, it was really harsh, she obviously didn't want me to be gone, and I told her that if we could make it through one

year of a Minor League season, then we may have a shot to make it. And so we did that, we made it through, and then I was with her for two years before I hung it up. And throughout that time I played winter ball and went away. So it is not easy by any means, there's a lot of emotional things going on, obviously. And some people have trust issues and stuff. A lot of players' girlfriends and wives went on the road and lived. It's just an added stress, and it's another thing to have to worry about. It is not easy at all, by any means.

**What is your favorite hobby other than baseball?**

I would say saltwater fishing. It's a blast. I am living in Kansas City, but we're actually moving to North Carolina to the beach, so I am pumped. I've lived out here for about six years, and now I'm actually going to be able to do that a lot more.

**During your career, did you have any baseball superstitions?**

I would try to have the same routine on my start days, one of the things that is tough to do when you're playing is get a routine, because you're up till the wee hours in the morning, and then you sleep all day, you sleep until at least noon, you get to the field at 1:30 or 2, and you're there until 11:30 to midnight. Then you do it all over again. So, for me I did not want to sleep until noon on start days, because it just kind of makes you tired. So I would try to get up early, try to go have a good breakfast, and just be active, but not lose a lot of energy. Our AA team was in Alabama. It's very hot there in the summertime, so I'd try to drink as much as fluids as possible. If you have a good start, then you might go back to that restaurant where you ate, so that you just try to keep it going.

**What is your favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional baseball player?**

My favorite thing was just how people look at you, respect you, and how kids look up to you. My least favorite thing was just how you're under a microscope all the time. You don't know if you're going to have a job from one day to the next. I remember my family would drive to see me. One time, while in Mobile, Alabama, they drove 17 hours to see me, and they had just checked into the hotel room, and I was at the field. Then my pitching coach told me I was getting called up to Durham. My parents had just driven 17 hours from Durham to see me there. I was like, "But when?" And he said, "Um, we can't get you onto the flight," because it was like Labor Day weekend and they didn't have any flights available."

He goes, "We know your family just drove here, do you think that you guys could get in a car and make it there by tomorrow, and you're going to start because James Shields is getting called up to the big leagues." And I said, "Oh my God." So I called up my parents, they checked out of the hotel, we started going 17 hours back home. We made it like more than halfway that night, stayed in a hotel room, got up early, made it back to the dorm, they dropped me off at the stadium, and they went home and slept. Shields started the first three innings of the game that night. Then I came in and finished the rest of the game. So shit just happens, and it's just crazy, but you can't make this stuff up.

**What are you doing now? Are you still involved at baseball at all?**

I'm not as much as I used to be. In the off-season I used to give pitching lessons and stuff, that was my job. My

neighbor across the street has a little league team that he has asked me to come out to. I try to as much as I can, but I work for a medical device company called Stryker. And it's very demanding to do well, so... I go into a lot of surgeries and we have to cover cases and things with doctors and stuff. So my hours are really crazy and we sell the instruments that they use for surgeries, so we always have to go in hospitals and stuff.

So I really don't much have time to spend on it, and I don't have kids yet so... I'm not saying that one day I won't, because I know I would love to do that. Right now I'm just focused on my job, it's successful and doing well right now. I'm just really career-oriented. I try to help out when I can, but I'm a big Royals fan. We're season ticket holders, my wife and I. We go to those games. We're pumped up about the World Series and got the chance to go to those games, but not as involved as I would have thought I would have been when I hung it up.

**If you could go back in time and talk to yourself as you were starting your professional career, what do you think you would say?**

That's a great question. I would have said start taking college classes while you were playing, because I realize now how important it was to get my degree. It took me about two years after I finished. That's the grown-up side of me saying that. But I don't regret anything. That's the great thing, and I'm very lucky that I am able to say that. I would just say to work hard, because I did everything that I think I would have done. So I don't have any regrets about that piece, that I didn't make it to the big leagues. I know I made it farther than a lot of guys had a chance to, and I'm okay with that.

# CHAPTER 10

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## CRAIG GENTRY

Drafted: 2006 by Texas Rangers (10<sup>th</sup> Round)  
Highest Level of Professional Baseball to Date: MLB

**What is your first baseball memory?**

My first baseball memory would have to be when I was three or four and we were having a family reunion. And I was running around with a big red plastic bat, a toy bat, and I was making everybody throw these little plastic balls and hit them. I just remember doing that at a family reunion.

**What was high school baseball like for you?**

I went to a small, private, Christian school and we actually were really good at baseball. My senior year we ended up winning our state championship. We were really good, and it was an absolute blast. We were like, the lowest classification in Arkansas and that was Class A, and that year we ended up beating almost everyone and going all the way. We'd beaten the AAAAA state champs that year, and I think maybe the AAAA state champs that year. We were a really good team and it was a blast getting to experience all that, and winning the state championship was fun.

**How is college baseball different than high school ball?**

It's just more competitive, and there are more games. In high school I played both basketball and baseball. I played other sports too, so my focus wasn't just on baseball. I also played golf and ran track, so I got to have a break from everything. But when you get to college, you have to just go to class and baseball. Or for a lot of guys, just baseball. So I mean, there was a big difference there. I went to junior college first for two years which helped prepare me for it, but college ball was a lot different. When your focus is solely on baseball and the competition's a lot better, it was really challenging.

**What was the scouting process like for you; did it start in high school or was that later in college?**

Yeah, that started in college. You know, I went to such a small school we didn't get much publicity – or whatever you want to call it. But when I got to college, I started seeing some scouts at the games and getting to talk to them a little bit. You know, they'd come out and watch and talk to you, but I guess it didn't really ramp up until I went to Arkansas. My third year in college I ended up going to Arkansas, and whenever you're playing college ball in the SEC you start having a lot of scouts at games. If you're playing really well, you start talking to them and things like that. I guess early in high school and even my first year or two in college, I don't think pro ball really ever entered my mind, you know? I guess I just never thought I was good enough, or it never really crossed my mind until I got to Arkansas, and I played really well there. I was thinking, "Oh wow, I might get a chance to play pro ball here." So yeah, you know, when I had success at Arkansas, everything kind of started ramping up and I started talking to a lot of scouts. I ended up, after my second year at Arkansas, getting drafted.

**What was it like being drafted by the Rangers; do you remember your thought process when it happened?**

I don't remember exactly; I remember I was excited, and I was drafted in the tenth round, but there was also some disappointment as well, because I had heard that I'd be drafted higher. So I was happy about being drafted, but a little disappointed that I wasn't drafted higher. But that's part of it and I was a senior sign out of college. I really didn't have any leverage on saying, "Okay, well you have to meet my demands as far as signing bonus comes, because it was either go play or I wasn't going to play



anymore. You know, I didn't get really much of a signing bonus, but that's part of it. I was excited to get drafted, obviously, and excited to get to continue to play baseball. So that was definitely awesome.

**What do you remember about your first day of professional baseball?**

I walked into the locker room and there were a lot of people there, and I had no idea who they were. I remember trying to meet everybody and everybody was in the same boat. You're just a little overwhelmed, a little nervous, excited, and you don't really know what to expect because it's completely different. At least it was completely different for me coming from Arkansas, which was a big SEC school with these really nice facilities and nice locker rooms, going to Spokane, Washington in this little Minor League stadium without a very good locker room. You're living with a host family, and it's just different, you know? It's not for everybody, but I actually loved it. I ended up making some great friends, and I think that's the greatest thing about pro ball, especially in the Minor Leagues, is you meet these guys. Everybody's in the same boat and you end up getting these really good friendships out of it.

**What was it like being a Minor League player on the road? What were the hotels like, what was the food like, and how did that change, that lifestyle, as you went from level to level?**

Obviously when you first start at the lower levels, your accommodations are not very good. You hardly get paid anything. I think my first paycheck for two weeks was six hundred bucks, and so you've got to pay rent or you've got to pay for other stuff, so that's tough. And then, when you're at the field you're not getting very good food. I

mean, you're basically eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every day. So the food's not that great, the locker rooms aren't that great, the hotels are not awful but they're not really nice hotels, and you have to share a room with somebody. It's definitely challenging.

**What were the roommates like throughout your career? Did you ever have a bad roommate or was it a pretty good experience?**

I think I lucked out for the most part. I don't know if I can really remember any time that I had a roommate that I just couldn't stand. Most of the guys that I've ever played with were pretty solid guys, and even if I might not have been best friends with them, I still got along with them well enough that it wasn't so awkward in the room that you were just kind of sitting there. I think for the most part I lucked out on that. Most of my roommates were good friends of mine and it ended up being a great situation. We had a great time.

**When you were new to Spokane, how were you treated? Were you hazed at all?**

Hazed? No, everybody there had just gotten drafted, and I was an older guy. I was a senior in college when I got there. I think I was 21 or 22 years old, so I was one of the older guys on the team. Like I said, we were all in the same boat and didn't really know what to expect, so we just played baseball and had fun. I mean, it was a good time. Guys on the team got really close. We might've hazed the first pick or maybe some high school kids here and there, but it wasn't anything bad. We would just mess with them, pull pranks, stuff like that.

**What were your goals when you started your professional career, and how did they change as you progressed from level to level?**

To be honest with you, I really don't think I had goals when I first started. It was one of those things where I didn't know or realize my potential, and I was just playing. First year was kind of the same thing, I just played, you know whatever, but ended up having a pretty good first year, and then the next year did okay. My first three years in pro ball were just very average. It wasn't bad, but wasn't really good either. So I really wasn't expecting too much, and I guess, to be honest with you, I didn't really have any set goals.

I know I always had a good work ethic, but I didn't realize what I could do. In 2009 I was repeating AA, so I got drafted in 2006, and I kind of slowly went to pretty much every level except Rookie ball. I went to Low-A, and then High-A, and then AA, and then AAA, and then in 2009 I was repeating AA again. I had a tough year the year before. I'd gotten hurt, and my focus really wasn't on baseball that much. I was just there and having fun and whatnot. Like I said, I was repeating AA and I was sitting there thinking, "Man, I'm 25 years old and I'm repeating AA. This might be my last year." So I was like, "I want to really focus on baseball and work hard, really want to give it a fair shot," and I ended up having a great year.

At the end of the season I got called up to the big leagues, and I think over the course of that season I started realizing, "Oh wow, maybe I'm better than what I thought I was." So I get called up to the big leagues and I was like, "Okay, this was never in my mind. Do I want to be a big leaguer? Absolutely." Did I ever really think I could be? No, but I think that season is when I really started setting goals as far

as, all right, I'm going to focus on baseball, I'm going to stay physically in shape, I'm going to do my workouts, I'm going to... you know, personal goals. I set personal goals for myself and I pretty much was able to meet them and get a chance to go to the big leagues, so that was pretty awesome.

**Elaborate on the injuries that you faced throughout your career. What it was like dealing with that?**

Yeah, I've actually faced a lot of injuries. We'd be here all day if we talked about all of them, but getting hurt is tough. It's tough for a team to want to invest in you if you're not playing that much; if it's like you're hurt all the time. So you obviously don't want to get hurt and it's no fun to sit there and do nothing, and then you now have to do rehab... just not a great situation. But you've got to go from the mindset of, "Okay, this is part of the game. This does happen," and you've got to make the best of it. As hard as it is to do that, you've got to. You have to overcome it and come back and be stronger for it.

I've definitely had a lot of injuries, but I think the toughest one for me was having wrist surgery. At the end of 2010, I'd been up and down at AAA and the big leagues that season, and we were in August now, and I was expecting to get called up in September to join the big league club, you know, for the playoff push, but by mid-August, I ended up breaking my wrist in AAA and was going to have to have surgery on it. So I mean, I was done for the year and ended up not getting to participate. The big league team ended up going all the way to the World Series, and I didn't get to participate in it. And that was a pretty tough thing to have to go through when you expect something great and it doesn't work out. But like I said, that's part of it sometimes. You've got to make the best of it. I'm sure

many people expect things to happen and then they don't happen, but I guess when you're in the midst of it, it's definitely a tough thing to swallow, especially if you're hurt, and you have to go through the surgery, and then you have to go through this painful rehab process. Yeah, that was definitely tough, but I think you learn a lot about yourself and you learn a lot about your character through those situations.

**In those tough moments when you were injured or other low moments in your career, did you ever want to quit professional ball, and if so, how did you overcome that?**

There are definitely a lot of those. I don't know, it's tough to say how different people find different ways to overcome things. I think for me it was that as I got older, and as things got tough, I kind of relied on my faith and things like that to help get me through it. I didn't want to quit, but just a part of me – I just couldn't do it. I wasn't ready to quit. I wasn't ready for it to stop, and as bad as a part of me wanted to a lot of different times, I just couldn't ever bring myself to quit. I'd invested too much time and too much effort, and I just didn't think those were the moments, or that was the time for it to happen, for me to be done. I just didn't have that feeling, so I just kept pushing through it, kept grinding through it as tough as it was, and just tried to stay as positive as I could. And then, eventually things got better and that's just how it works. So far it's worked out.

**So far, what do you think have been the highest and lowest moments of your professional career?**

I'd say the highest moment for me was in 2011, getting to play in the World Series. Obviously we lost and it was a

pretty devastating loss, so that could be also classified as one of the lowest moments. But I think the lowest moment right now in my career would have to be this, right now; what I'm going through as far as just coming off of two years, really tough years. Last year I got sent down to AAA and then in the off-season, I basically got released and then this year, I was on the disabled list for a couple months. Then I came off the disabled list and they released me. I'm not playing right now, so I think right now would probably be the lowest part. But it's also kind of one of those moments where I'm older, I've turned 33, and I've gotten quite a few years of big league experience, so I'm kind of in one of those moments where I'm wondering if I'll keep playing or not.

**How has playing professional baseball changed your perception of the sport?**

It's more of a job now, you know? Obviously when you're growing up and you're playing, and you're in college, you're having fun. You're just playing. You know, you're not worried about anything else, you're just playing. Even when I first started pro ball it was the same thing, but I think as I've gotten older, after having a family, priorities change and you start thinking of it more as a job. You've got to provide for your family and you've got to do different things like that. So now it's not so much about playing for the joy of the game, it's more about playing because it's my job. I've got to do my job.

**Throughout your career, did you ever get in any memorable conflicts with other players or coaches? If so, tell me about that?**

I never got in any... I'm not a guy who... I got into maybe a couple arguments here and there, but not big, you know,

where you start roughing up guys or anything like that. I'm a pretty non-confrontational guy. I'm not going to be that guy that really wants to fight and stuff like that. I do remember one time with my manager, who I loved, he calls me in my office in 2009, the year I ended up getting called up for the first time to the big leagues. After the first month I was playing terrible. He calls me in the office and he just started saying some stuff to me or whatever, and got me all fired up, and we started getting into this argument in his office. So we're kind of going at it with each other. Then I ended up just leaving and getting up and slamming the door. It was after that argument with him, when my whole season turned around and I started playing really well. And even to this day if I see him, we'll still talk about that and laugh about that moment, that argument that we had in his office and how much better I started playing after that, and eventually getting called up to the big leagues. So, I think that was pretty funny, but for the most part, I never got into any big conflicts. I pretty much stayed under the radar for the most part.

**Who do you think is the best player that you ever played alongside?**

Well, I played with some good ones, like Josh Hamilton, the year he won the MVP. I played with Michael Young and that guy won quite a few batting titles. Then I played with Adrian Beltre, and I've also played with Mike Trout. So it's tough to say, because as far as teammates go, I think Michael Young and Adrian Beltre are the two guys that kind of come to mind, just because they had so much success. They're great teammates, they respect the game, they work hard, and when I played with them we were really good. We went to the World Series together so when you say best players or whatever, best teammates, those two guys are the first two guys that come to mind.

**What does it feel like to play on the biggest stage in the world in Major League ball, and then in the World Series, what was that like? Do you feel a lot of pressure?**

Yeah, there is a lot of pressure – a whole lot of pressure. If you really factor into it that you have fans, media... especially in the World Series. You've got so much media and all these things going on, so it's definitely a lot of pressure and it's scary. But at the same time, it's awesome. It's tough to explain it like that, but when people ask me, "What was it like playing in the World Series?" my answer is, "I was terrified but it was awesome." It was scary, fun, and you just can't really describe it because I never even expected to ever get to play in the World Series, so when it happened it was overwhelming. It was just unbelievable, the feelings that you feel and everything you go through, the emotions, I mean you just can't really describe it.

When we played in the World Series in '11 we were actually down to the last strike where we had a two-run lead and the other team was down to their last strike two separate times. And so everyone on my team literally thought we were going to win. Both times they ended up somehow getting a hit and tying the ball game, and then they ended up beating us. It was like, just in that one game you go from feeling like you're going to be World Series champs in less than five minutes, but two seconds later it's just like, ugh. You just go down to rock-bottom. It sucks the wind out of you, but the emotions and the feelings and everything are just incredible.

It's still a tough pill to swallow, and I don't even think I can really watch many highlights from that World Series.

**What's your take on the whole steroid issue? Is it hard as a player who works so hard, knowing other guys are just cheating?**

Well, that's a tough issue because there are guys that have gotten caught doing it, and they are guys I like and respect. I think it's definitely tough now to get away with it so it's not very prevalent anymore. You know, most guys that are doing things are getting caught and I think it's showing up now. I really don't even think about it anymore, you know? Personally, I played with a guy that got suspended (he got caught and got suspended), a great dude, but he just made a mistake. I think this game sometimes can lead to that, you know? Guys want to succeed, they want to do well, and they want to do well at all costs, so sometimes they get lost in it and they do something that they regret. I think that's happened to a lot of guys.

There are some guys that want to cheat the system and want to get around it, but most of them are getting caught. I think that the system they have in place right now is pretty solid and is catching guys. So I don't really think that it is much of an issue anymore. I think that, for the most part, there's not very many guys at all that are trying to do that stuff. I think the guys that have tried doing it have gotten caught, so it's weeding itself out of there, compared to ten, fifteen, twenty years ago when it was huge. Everybody was doing it, and now, it's dropped drastically. So I think the system they have in place is solid and I really don't give it much thought anymore.

**Do you think that guys like Bonds, and McGuire, and Sosa deserve to be in the Hall of Fame?**

That's not for me to say. Those guys are some unbelievable players, I mean, unbelievable. The stuff they did in baseball

was unreal, and I'm not their judge. I'm not a guy that's going to sit here and say 'they deserve this' or 'they deserve that,' because that's not for me to say. All I know is, they were some really good baseball players, and it was a lot of fun to watch them. I'm just going to leave it at that, because I don't want to get involved in any controversy or anything like that.

**Are there any parts of the Collective Bargaining Agreement that you don't like, or would like to see changed?**

As far as the Baseball Players Association, it's light years above and beyond any other sport. You know, we get guaranteed contracts, our league minimum is higher than any other sport, our benefits, our pension plan, all that stuff is great. So I haven't really been concerned over anything. I think it's pretty fair right now. I think that the owners are doing well and the players are doing well. I think that the Players Association has done a great job of protecting all the players, and I think that's what's important. The players are the ones that are making the money for these owners, so you've got to take care of them.

I think that right now they may be discussing a shorter schedule. Which, obviously, I think would be great. I think the 162 game season is tough, man. It's grueling, especially if you add in spring training and the 30+ games you have in spring training. I mean, you're gone from mid-February until (if you go deep into the post-season) basically mid- to end of October, with only a couple months off. You might have two or three off days per month, but that's tough to do, man. It's not very friendly for a family life. It's tough to spend time with your family, especially when you're gone all the time and then you've got to be at the ball park all day. So I definitely would like to see less games, but I don't

know. I don't even know if that would be a possibility. I think right now their discussion is this: if there are going to be less games, then guys should get paid a lot less. But I can see both sides of it. So I think right now, as far as I'm concerned and as far as I can tell, I think it's pretty fair. Everything's pretty solid and the players are getting taken care of.

**Can you talk a little more about balancing professional baseball with family life? What is it like trying to do those two things at once?**

It's one of the hardest things there is, when you're gone all the time. I have a two-year-old girl and when we first had her, we had her at the very beginning of the season. I had just gotten traded to a new team, and so my wife didn't know anybody. We had this baby, and she had no help, and I was gone half the time, or more than half the time. I was gone all the time. I'd wake up and then have to go to the field at one or two o'clock. It was definitely tough, especially when you add children into it, because your wife can't go on the road with you as often as they might like.

Everything is really just focused around you and baseball, and that's kind of tough for a family. Family, in my opinion, is more important than baseball, so whenever you're not getting to spend much time with them it can definitely put a strain on it. And I'm sure the divorce rate in baseball is just astronomical. I know of a lot of people whose family life is really struggling, because of the strain that the game has put on the families. It's definitely tough. You have to make it a huge priority, and you have to make a lot of sacrifices. Your family has to make a lot of sacrifices to make it work.

**Do you have any baseball superstitions?**

Not really. I'm not a very superstitious guy. I don't really do stuff like that so... no, sorry.

**What is your favorite and least favorite thing about being a professional player?**

I think my favorite thing is just the feeling of getting up there and getting a game-winning hit, or getting a hit to put the team in the lead, or making a great play. It's like those emotions are so awesome. But then when things are going bad it's tough, really tough. My least favorite thing is having to be gone all the time, away from my family, like we just discussed.

Getting to play in the big leagues is amazing, and so is just everything about it. You play at amazing stadiums, you're playing against the best players, you get to stay in the best hotels, and just everything. It's just fun, you know? When you're playing well it's a great time.

**What are some of the craziest or funniest stories that have happened throughout the years as a professional baseball player, with the team?**

Some of the craziest... oh man. I don't know man. I mean, that's a tough one to ask because I don't want to throw anybody under the bus.

**What do you think set you apart, as you were coming up through the system, from your fellow teammates? What do you think got you to the Major Leagues?**

I think it was my speed and my defense, plus the fact that I could play all three outfield positions and I could steal bases. Also I was hitting pretty well in the Minor Leagues. There were some injuries that happened on the big league

team, and that gave me an opportunity to go up there and play, and once I got the opportunity, I was lucky enough to make the most of it. They took a chance on me, and I ended up playing well. I ended up hitting well up there. But I think if it wasn't for my speed, I would've never gotten that opportunity.

**Has being a professional baseball player changed your love of the game at all?**

Yeah, I think so, a little bit. Like I said earlier, you start thinking of it more as a job, or you can for sure. And I think also as you get older you're just like, "Oh man, I don't want to go on this road trip," especially if you're struggling. You're like, "I don't want to go to the field right now," and it's just such a grueling, long schedule it can be mentally draining. You know, I think if you allow all that to affect you then yeah, it can definitely take your love of the game away. I think there's been moments in my career where that's happened. So there's definitely a part of me that still loves the game, but then there's definitely a part of me that's like, "You know, it's just a job, too." So there's definitely a fine line there and I think as you get older it's only natural to start thinking of baseball as more of a job.

**What do you think the biggest misconception about professional baseball is?**

People think it's a glamorous lifestyle, and everything is just easy and fun, but it's not. I mean, the Minor Leagues are just a grind. You don't get paid hardly anything, and you are traveling on either buses all night, or early plane flights, and playing that night, and then you only get one or two off days a month. In the big leagues it's just really long. Like I said, you're grinding it through every day. You're tired, you're hurt, you're away from your family all

the time... it's just tough. It's a grind, and it's not all candies and rainbows.

**If you could go back in time what do you think you would tell yourself as you were starting your professional career?**

I'll tell you, when I first started, I think I would tell myself to take it seriously and to work hard. I think my first few years, because I didn't think that I could make it very far, I just kind of wasn't really focused. So I think I'd tell myself to focus and really give it everything you got from the very get-go. I think I waited a couple of years to get to that point, and I might've been able to get to the big leagues earlier. I don't know for sure, but I can't look back and totally regret anything. I mean, I got to the big leagues, and I played over five years in the big leagues, so that's definitely been a blessing.

**My final question for you is: looking forward at the road ahead, do you think you'll play with another team, or do you think that your career is over?**

That's a good question. I'm going through that in my head. You know, there's definitely a part of me that wants to keep playing; a big part of me. Like I said, I struggled the last two years and the last years have been really tough. I would definitely like for my career not to end on that note, so I'd like to keep playing and turn everything around, but at the same time I'm older as far as baseball goes, and I've had a fairly long career. So if it did end, I wouldn't be too upset, but I think right now I'm still kind of mulling over that decision. I have the whole off-season to do that, so I haven't come to a decision yet, but there's definitely a big part of me that wants to keep playing; wants to give it another shot. But I'm not sure yet.

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