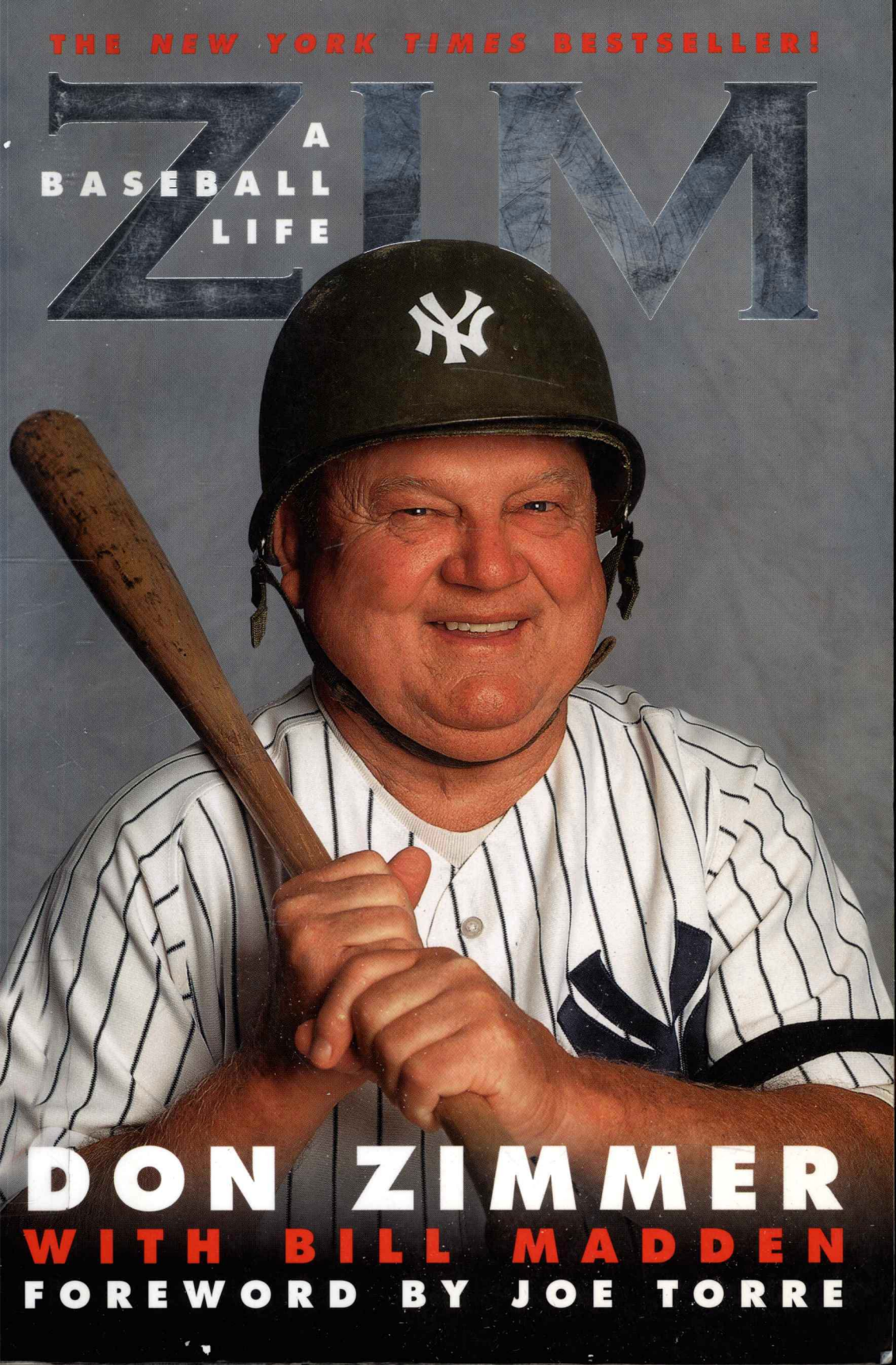
THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER!

ZIM

A BASEBALL LIFE



DON ZIMMER

WITH BILL MADDEN

FOREWORD BY JOE TORRE

ZIM

A BASEBALL LIFE

Don Zimmer
with Bill Madden

Contemporary Books
Chicago New York San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zimmer, Don, 1931-
Zim : a baseball life / Don Zimmer with Bill Madden.
p. cm.
Originally published: Kingston, N.Y. : Total/Sports Illustrated, c2001.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-07-139003-0
1. Zimmer, Don, 1931- . 2. Baseball players—United States—Biography.
3. Baseball coaches—United States—Biography. I. Madden, Bill. II. Title.

GV865.Z56 A3
796.357'092—dc21 2001047586

Contemporary Books
A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 LBM/LBM 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN 0-07-139003-0

This book was set in Bembo
Printed and bound by Lake Book Manufacturing

Cover design by Nick Panos
Cover photograph copyright © Neil Leifer
Interior design by Ann Sullivan

McGraw-Hill books are available at special quantity discounts to use as premiums and sales promotions, or for use in corporate training programs. For more information, please write to the Director of Special Sales, Professional Publishing, McGraw-Hill, Two Penn Plaza, New York, NY 10121-2298. *Or contact your local bookstore.*

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

PROLOGUE

It had taken him nearly six weeks to make the call. After contemplating the pain in his knee and the aftereffects of a severe case of the flu (brought on by a half-dozen cross-country trips at the end of the season), he decided he would come back for his 53rd year in baseball. On this day, Don Zimmer found himself strolling among the images of the game's immortals in the Hall of Fame. Outside, the grounds were covered with a fresh coating of snow, temperatures hovering in the 20s, and all those summers in Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Washington, Tokyo, San Diego, Boston, Texas, Chicago, Denver, and the Bronx never seemed so far away. It was, as Zimmer observed, about the unlikeliest place he could ever expect to be at any time in his life, let alone three weeks before Christmas and six weeks before his 70th birthday.

"I still can't figure out why you want a .235 hitter like me here," he said to Hall of Fame President Dale Petroskey, who merely smiled and replied, "Because you're as much a part of this game as any of the people enshrined here."

It seems they wanted his uniform to be displayed as part of a special Subway Series exhibit—a request Zimmer could only find amusing. "Imagine," he said, "all these guys on these great Yankee teams of Joe Torre, and I'm the first one going to the Hall of Fame!"

As he would soon discover, however, they wanted much more than just his uniform. They wanted the man and, most especially, his memories.

To the baby boomer generation, he was our unlikely baseball tour guide—this squat, bald, impish man with a face like lumpy oatmeal; the self-made journeyman with whom we could all so easily identify. It was his journey that took us from the innocence of our gum-card-collecting youth to our $150 seats at the World Series five decades later. And all the while, he could maintain the pixyish smile of a man who knew that the real meaning of the baseball life was fun.

As Petroskey and the Hall of Fame historians would later attest, it was Zimmer, and Zimmer alone, who could provide that bridge—uninterrupted—from the infancy of integrated baseball to the era of

the $250 million contract. Now it was a game in which Hispanics made up nearly 25 percent of its population. Only Zimmer was there when a young Puerto Rican outfielder named Roberto Clemente was being squirreled away in the Brooklyn Dodger farm system, and when another Puerto Rican outfielder, Bernie Williams, would haul in an $87.5 million contract from the New York Yankees. And when a thirty-something refugee pitcher they called "El Duque" joined the Yankees in 1998 after reportedly fleeing Castro's Cuba on a rickety boat, Zimmer had been the only one who could speak from experience to him of having played on those same Havana ballfields before the revolutionists arrived.

Yes, as Petroskey knew, only Zimmer could tell them what it was like to be both Jackie Robinson's teammate and Derek Jeter's mentor.

Like Forrest Gump, he was right there, in the middle of it all, as baseball evolved from a sleepy-time, all-white, mom-and-pop pastime whose boundaries did not extend farther west than the Mississippi River, to a global, corporate colossus.

You could only wonder how much of this was sifting through his mind as he strolled through the great hall of plaques in the heart of the museum. So many former teammates—Robinson, Reese, Snider, Campanella, Koufax, Drysdale. The fiercely contested opponents of youth who became kindred friends—Berra, Musial, Ashburn, and Roberts.

"Robin Roberts lives near me in the Tampa area," Zimmer said, grinning, "and I was at a breakfast with him the day before I came up here. I couldn't resist telling him I was going to the Hall of Fame. He told me to say hello to his plaque. So that's what I'm doing."

"Ashburn, now there was a dandy. We were teammates twice, on a bad Cubs team and an even worse Mets team. Oh, the fun I had with him, especially years later when he was a broadcaster with the Phillies and I was either coaching or managing the Cubs. He'd always have me on his pregame show. We told our stories and we'd both be laughing so hard we could barely get through the show."

But when he got to Pee Wee Reese's plaque, he paused, his face stiffening. His clear blue eyes began to water and for a solemn moment Zimmer was unable to contain his emotion.

"Captain," he said softly. "God, how I miss him."

Not far away from Reese's plaque were the ones of Snider, Campy, and Robinson.

"I hope I live to see the day when Gil Hodges has a plaque here too," Zimmer said. "I don't know what the criteria are, but in my mind if Gil Hodges isn't a Hall of Famer, I don't know who is. There was a man."

He moved on, past the cubicle that contained the great black stars of the '50s and '60s—Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, and Frank Robinson.

"I only played with Frank," he said. "Fiercest competitor you could ever find. Aaron was just one great ballplayer. People only talk about his home runs. He doesn't get the credit he deserves as an outfielder. He could throw and field with Clemente or Kaline. Mays, what can you say? Wasn't no way he couldn't beat you. He was simply the best there ever was. That's just my opinion."

He had stories about all of them, of course. Stories he would gladly retell for the Hall archivists. Hell, he'd been telling them for seven decades, to all the new generations of baseball players if they wanted to hear them. They did.

"What was Pee Wee Reese like?" Jeter would ask him, echoing the question of yesteryear, "What did you do in the war, Daddy?"

And Zimmer would reply in mock disdain, "You don't want to know. Do you think I'm gonna tell you he wasn't as good as you?"

And then he would proceed to regale the young Yankee shortstop with his Brooklyn war stories. He would tell him how Reese was a totally different shortstop than Jeter in that he didn't have the size, the speed, or the power. What he had was indefinable leadership. It was a different game back then. Shortstops weren't expected to hit home runs. Pitchers weren't afraid to pitch inside, and they finished what they started. Guys played hurt for fear of losing their jobs. Worked offseasons, too, to make ends meet.

"I don't begrudge anything today's players get," Zimmer said. "It astounds me that owners would pay as much for one player as they have for the entire ballclub. I can't relate to that, but I accept it as how the game has changed. One way it *hasn't* changed, though, is that money doesn't necessarily buy championships. I live in Tampa and I

watched the team there spend a ton of money before the 2000 season. Then they went out and won 69 games. You spend all that money, you expect to win. Maybe that's what makes Steinbrenner different. He gets accused of spending a lot of money and he does. But he wins. Must be because he spends it on the right players."

Zimmer knew from the money too. Any one of his individual World Series shares from the Yankee championships of '96, '98, '99, and 2000 was more than he earned his entire playing career. But despite the cold, corporate, money-driven enterprise baseball has become, the fun, he insisted, still hasn't gone out of it for him.

"Maybe," he said, "it might have, had I not been around this Yankee team with Joe Torre these last five years. There's nothing more fun than winning, and these guys have been special."

So after coming to this sacred baseball place at the behest of its keepers, he was more assured than ever that coming back for another season was the right thing for him to do. He remained Joe Torre's indispensable sidekick and the last link to Pee Wee Reese's Brooklyn. And he would remain true to both.

BILL MADDEN
COOPERSTOWN, N.Y.
DECEMBER 2000

FOREWORD

Quite simply, Don Zimmer has a feel for the game like nobody else. He sits next to me in the dugout for every game, offering sound advice and entertaining us with incredible stories.

Zim has managed four different teams (San Diego, Boston, Texas, and the Chicago Cubs). He has also coached for the Yankees two other times before he joined the team in 1996, so I knew his experience plus his time in New York would be valuable for me. He's old school, yet to watch him communicate with the young players says a lot about his love for the game and the way it's played.

Zim's experience was invaluable on our way to four World Series championships. During a game, it's "we can steal on this guy" or "let's hit and run here." We would agree and disagree, but we never stopped communicating to find a way to win. Zim and I make a good combo—sort of like fire and ice. I guess I don't have to tell you who's who.

Passion is a word that describes my bench coach very well. He's got that fire in his belly. I thought I was going to lose Zim to retirement in 1999 when, during spring training, he had knee surgery and I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I asked George Steinbrenner if he would be okay with Zim taking over during my absence. The workload of managing, a bad knee, and the Yankees—with all the pressure to win—took its toll. At first, Zim (out of respect) tried to handle the team in the same manner as I would. I told him to just be himself, but he felt very responsible, and the fire burned bright and intense.

I've managed for more than 15 years, and hired friends to be coaches. In Zim's case, I hired a coach who has become one of my closest friends. Picking Zim as my bench coach may have been the best decision I have ever made. I check with him for approval on everything except what wine to order at dinner. Although I must say, he's come a long way. To slip in beside Don Zimmer in the dugout, you would understand why I've come to love this man. Four World Series in five years—I'd say we're a pretty good daily double. Also, the friendship that my wife, Ali, and I share with both Don and Soot is terrific.

Zim: A Baseball Life is a warm, funny, sentimental journey through seven decades of baseball. Zim has seen it all, and now he tells it all as our personal historian of the game over the last half century. I've been so fortunate to be the beneficiary of all this knowledge sitting right next to me. Now, in the pages that follow, everyone else will find out exactly what I mean.

JOE TORRE
DECEMBER 2000

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their contributions to this book:

Soot Zimmer, for having both the foresight and the tireless devotion to compile the two dozen scrapbooks and all the priceless photographs of her husband's career which helped provide the basis for this book.

Rick Cerrone, Arthur Richman, Jason Zillo, Billy O'Sullivan, Matt McKendry, and Rikki Dileo of the New York Yankees public relations department for researching background information on Don Zimmer's coaching career with the Yankees.

Josh Weintraub, segment producer for The Late Show with David Letterman, for providing additional anecdotal material obtained from Mr. Zimmer from his appearances on the program.

Art Berke, a cherished friend who provided the author the vast resources of *Sports Illustrated*, which were invaluable in filling in details of Mr. Zimmer's life.

Moss Klein, Marty Appel, and Bob Raissman for assisting in the research for this book.

Jeff Idelson and the Baseball Hall of Fame for the hospitality they showed Mr. Zimmer and their assistance in other research for this book.

David Fisher and Tom Connor, who believed so deeply in this project and provided the relentless encouragement to see it to fruition.

RLR Associates Ltd., particularly Jonathan Diamond and Jennifer Unter, for making it happen.

Jed Thorn, for his capable line editing of this book.

And lastly, Robert Wilson, a writer's editor, who was a delight to work with. To quote Bogie's "Rick" to Claude Rains' Captain Renault: "This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

CONTENTS

1

Who Am I and How Did I Get Here?

I thought of calling this book "Confessions of a .235 Lifetime Hitter," if only because my own grandchildren have told me that the thing I'll be most remembered for after 52 years in baseball is wearing an army helmet in the dugout. Not for being a central figure in one of the most brilliant managing moves in World Series history, or for being one of the four $125,000 "premium" expansion players selected by the original Mets in 1961, or even for managing two of baseball's most storied franchises, the Boston Red Sox and Chicago Cubs, in two of their most exciting seasons.

Nope, my grandkids tell me, that army helmet—which a national TV audience of 30 million people saw me wearing in the Yankee dugout the night after I got beaned in the head by a foul ball—has forever given me my special niche in baseball history.

I suppose that's only appropriate since the most defining moments of my career have involved my head. In this latest and hopefully last one, it was the fifth inning of the first game of the 1999 Division Series between the Yankees and Texas Rangers. I was sitting next to Joe Torre in the Yankee dugout in my capacity as bench coach. Chuck Knoblauch, the Yankees' leadoff man, was at the plate and he took a funny swing at the pitch. I was half-looking out on the field and half-watching Knoblauch and I didn't see the ball until it was about two feet from my face. I ducked my head and—smack!—I felt the ball hit me on the side of my face. The next thing I knew I was laying on the

floor of the dugout, numb and woozy. Then I saw blood and I got panicked. I yelled, "Get this jacket off!"

They cut the jacket off me, carried me back into the clubhouse and laid me on the trainer's table. I was bleeding like a hog and didn't really know how badly I was hurt. I knew I had been whacked in the head but I didn't know where. That's what scared me, knowing all the things that have happened to my head.

As I lay there, I looked up and Yogi Berra and George Steinbrenner were standing over me. It was then that they told me the ball had hit me between the neck and ear and had nicked the ear which accounted for all the blood. George was especially concerned and I heard him say they're going to have to put a Plexiglass shield in front of the dugout "because we can't have guys getting hurt like this."

They told me my wife, Jean, who I have always affectionately called Soot, was out in the hallway, and they led her into the clubhouse. I told her, "Have someone take you back to your seat in the stands, grab yourself a hotdog and enjoy the rest of the game."

After she left, all I could think was, *This would have been a helluva way to end my career in baseball, especially since this was the way it all started.*

I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and attended Western Hills High School. My coach there, Paul Nohr, was one of the greatest high school baseball coaches ever. Nearly a dozen of his players, including Pete Rose, Russ Nixon, Clyde Vollmer, Herman Wehmeier, Ed Brinkman, and Art Mahaffey, went on to the big leagues, and four of them—Rose, Nixon, Jim Frey, and myself—all managed in the big leagues. That's quite a legacy.

The summer before my senior year at Western Hills, my American Legion team won the national championship. The finals were held at Gilmore Stadium in Los Angeles and we got to meet Babe Ruth, who was at the game doing some promotional work for American Legion baseball. Ruth gave a speech after the final game—I'll never forget how hoarse his voice was; he died a year later—and they finally had to quiet the crowd down after about two or three minutes so he could talk. He said he had traveled all over the country watching American Legion baseball and the best team won. You can imagine how that made us all feel. Then he signed a ball for every one of us.

When we returned in triumph to Cincinnati, it seemed like the whole town came out to the railroad station to greet us. I lived on a dead-end street with no traffic and we played ball there just about every day. That summer, the ball we used was the one Ruth signed for me. What did I know? We played with it until we knocked the cover off it and then we put black tape all over it. The last time I saw it, it was in some sewer. Only a few years ago did I realize Babe Ruth signed balls are worth anywhere from $5,000–$10,000 in good shape.

As a reward for winning the championship, the townspeople gave us a trip to New York and tickets for the first two games of the 1947 World Series between the Yankees and Dodgers.

I'll never forget that first day I set foot inside Yankee Stadium and saw Jackie Robinson at first base for the Dodgers. I think of that every time I walk into Yankee Stadium. That was Jackie's rookie season, and little did I know a few years later I'd be calling him a teammate and, even more importantly, a friend.

During my senior year, in which I made all-Ohio as quarterback for our football team and played shortstop on the baseball team, I was offered numerous scholarships to play both sports in college. I got invited along with one of my best friends, Glenn Sample (who was a tough lineman), to fly down to the University of Kentucky for the weekend where the legendary coach, Bear Bryant, had invited us. I had never been in an airplane. Sample was planning to go to college. I wasn't, but for a chance to get my first plane ride, I made the trip with him. I roomed with Babe Parilli, one of the all-time great quarterbacks who went from Kentucky to a long career in the pros. They had us throw passes and do some running in our T-shirts and shorts, and afterward Bryant offered us full four-year scholarships.

I told him I was only interested in playing baseball, and he understood. Years later, when I was managing Knoxville in the Southern Association, Bryant's son was the general manager of the Birmingham team in the league. On our first trip to Birmingham, the visiting clubhouse man came to me and said, "There's a guy outside with a hat who wants to see you." It was Bryant. A few years after that, he came to visit me again in Boston when I was managing the Red Sox and one of his former 'Bama quarterbacks, Butch Hobson, was my third baseman.

I often thought about how funny it was to become friends with Bryant, even though I never played for him. I just wanted to play baseball and the sooner I got my career underway the better. Naturally, my first preference was to play for my hometown team, the Reds, and they kept telling me how much they wanted me. Their local scout, Buzz Boyle, invited me out to Crosley Field on a number of occasions and I got to know all the Reds players at the time, as well as their manager, Johnny Neun.

At the same time, Cliff Alexander, the football coach at our rival Woodward High, was a bird dog scout for the Dodgers, and one day he came to me and told me he'd like to take me to Brooklyn for a tryout. I told the Reds about it and Johnny Neun got half-hot and called my dad and said, "We've been recruiting him, you can't let him go to Brooklyn!" My dad assured him I wouldn't sign in New York.

When I got to Brooklyn and reported to Ebbets Field, George Sisler, the Hall of Fame first baseman, was conducting the tryout as the director of minor league operations for the Dodgers. Mind you, Sisler was a legend, a lifetime .340 hitter, and when I got up to bat for the first time, he was leaning on the cage behind me, a real imposing figure. The last thing I wanted to do was to swing and miss. So I choked up on the bat and started spraying the ball all over the field. After that first round, Cliff Alexander came over and said to me: "Where did you come up with that new style of hitting?" I told him I just wanted to make contact for Sisler. He looked at me and shook his head. "When we come back here tomorrow," he said, "go back to your old swing. I told him you were a power hitter and he's wondering where the power is."

Well, the next day I hit three or four balls out of the ballpark and Branch Rickey, the Dodger president, was there to watch it. After the tryout, he said, "We'll offer you $2,500 to sign a contract with us." Because my dad had promised the Reds I wouldn't sign anything in New York, I went home to Cincinnati and told the Reds of the Dodger offer. They said to me: "We can't offer you that, but we'll give you $2,000 and start you off in Class-B ball instead of Class D where the Dodgers will start you." They came up with the weakest excuse for not giving me the same money, saying "We're not sure if your arm is big league caliber." They'd been courting me two years, watching me play quarterback and shortstop, and if there's one thing they knew

about me it was that my arm was my best attribute.

So I had no trouble saying no to my hometown team and signing with the Dodgers. As promised, they started me out at their lowest rung, a Class-D farm team in Cambridge, Maryland. I'd like to say I wasted no time in making the Reds look bad, but it didn't quite work out that way. In fact, my first experience in professional baseball was probably more embarrassing to the Dodgers.

I reported to Cambridge in 1949 with a salary of $150 per month—$2,550 for the whole season. I bought a used green Ford coupe with a stick shift for $700 and, yeah, I thought I was a real hot potato.

In only my fourth game I made Eastern Shore League history. It was the last year of the league's existence and I probably did as much as anyone to hasten its shutdown. We played in a very primitive old ballpark in which the infield was full of bumps and ruts. In this particular game, I was playing shortstop and our pitcher was a guy named Zeke Zeisz, who was the only veteran on the team.

The first ground ball to me hit a rut and struck me in the shoulder before continuing on into left field. The next ball to come my way hit me in the neck and also wound up in left field. Now, there was a pop fly hit into shallow left. I went out and the left fielder came in. But when the left fielder gave up on the ball, it came down and bounced off my glove. I couldn't believe what was happening to me, but I shrugged it off, chalking it up to the field conditions and circumstances beyond my control.

The next inning, another hard ground ball was hit to me at short and this time I fielded it cleanly. Unfortunately, in my elation of finally catching something that came my way, I threw the ball across the diamond two feet over the first baseman's head and off the front of an outhouse that was behind first base. You've heard the old expression "He went from the penthouse to the shithouse"? Well that pretty much describes my introduction to professional baseball.

After the game, I was walking off the field behind Zeisz and our third baseman, Hank Parker. I heard Zeisz say, "What the hell kind of shortstop is that guy? He can't play a lick!" Parker replied, "He was playing high school ball six days ago. Give the kid a break!" I never forgot that vote of confidence.

Meanwhile, I had arranged to have the newspapers sent home to

my father in Cincinnati, and a couple of days later I got a phone call from him. All he said was: "Well, it didn't take you long to break a record. Six errors in one game? According to the paper, nobody ever did that before in that league!"

I finished my first pro season with numbers that hardly gave hint of a future in the big leagues—a .227 batting average, four homers in 304 at bats, and 27 errors. I half-expected the Dodgers to release me, but the next year they sent me to Hornell, New York, a little railroad town in the PONY League, another Class-D affiliate. We played in a tiny little ballpark right next to the railroad and it was filled every night. I don't know if it was the enthusiastic crowds or just the year's experience, but I had a real breakout season there. I hit .315 and led the league in runs scored with 146 and homers with 23. I also knocked in 122 runs in 123 games and stole home 10 times! We had a big Cuban left fielder named Oscar Sierra who couldn't run a lick but hit nothing but line drives. I'd get on base, steal second and third, and Sierra would knock me in. I stole 63 bases all told. Charlie Neal, who would later go with me to the big leagues, was also on that team, playing second and third.

The next year I reported to Vero Beach looking forward to seeing if I could make a higher level. There were over 700 players in spring training as the Dodgers had 23 farm teams back then. They sent me to Elmira of the Class-A Eastern League. The jump from Class D to Class A was one of the biggest ever made by a player in the Dodger organization. This was when they began talking about me as the Dodgers' shortstop successor to Pee Wee Reese.

I was in pretty select company. At that time, the Dodgers had six other shortstops in their organization—Eddie Miksis, Tommy Brown, Rocky Bridges, Billy Hunter, Chico Carrasquel, and Jim Pendleton—who all wound up in the big leagues. I might add, none of them—including me—was ever able to replace Pee Wee. There's a reason Pee Wee's in the Hall of Fame. He was a great shortstop for a long, long time.

Over the winter, between the 1950 and '51 seasons, my older brother Harold, who we called Junior, asked me if I could get him a tryout with the Dodgers. Harold was a pretty good hitter and might have been a better ballplayer than I was. He just didn't really have a