

THE FRONT LINES

Don't Get This Guy Started

By Dave Ashman

I have a friend who has the gift of gab. He can talk to anyone about anything and be extremely engaging in the process. Nothing fazes him — a trait in him I've always admired. My friend also loves baseball — no, he lives for baseball. He is a student of the game, he still plays the game, and he talks a good game. If he could, this guy would be the oldest bat boy in the Major Leagues.

Every year this friend of mine goes to spring training in Arizona and prays to the baseball gods. If you talk the talk, you have to walk the walk....

Mr. Baseball

It is a great day in Arizona. My friend and I are going to visit four of our colleagues at various training facilities in the area and take in a couple of games later in the day. We tour the Angels facility first and talk a little "baseball." As the conversation concludes, I look over at my friend, who is beginning to change. He has the sunglasses on, got the "pinch" working, has the baseball player "stance" going — he is beginning some kind of metamorphosis.

The next stop is the Oakland A's training facility. A colleague of mine, Bob Alejo, is a coach there. We catch up with Bob, and he walks us over to where the team is taking batting practice. Bob

introduces us to the batting coach. My friend walks up to the batting cage and starts talking baseball with the coaches. I watch as the metamorphosis continues. He stands next to the batting coach and looks like a mirror image. He has the batting-cage stance working (one foot on the lowest rail and the arms fold-



Ken Griffey has the "stroke."

ed over the top rail in the rear, off to the side); he has the vocabulary working ("quick hands, slow bat"); he has the moves (he shows a few rookies the stroke); this guy is smooth. The younger players think he is a coach he is so convincing.

The next stop is the Padres training facility. We tour the facility and stay for the game. We watch batting practice, then sit on the field and watch the game with the grounds crew.

I look around and see my friend talking to Tony Gwynn. They are laughing and having a wonderful time. They look like two old college

roommates catching up on lost time. When my friend comes over, he has a ball Tony autographed for him. It says, "To Chris, my best friend who I don't even know." I am impressed as my friend continues to chat with other players.

During the game, my friend is throwing foul balls into the stands like the base coaches do. I can't believe this guy. I'd have bet someone would ask him for an autograph, figuring he's an ex-big leaguer visiting the boys.

The metamorphosis is now complete. My friend has turned into Mr. Baseball. He has it all working — the swagger, the talk and the stance. He now begins to talk about the greats of the game and how they fit into the lore of baseball. I am beginning to wonder about some kind of rehab program.

The last stop is Scottsdale Stadium to see the Giants play. My friend is now using terms like



Jeff Bagwell has the "stance."

"Gratis Apparatus" and "He can't hit the deuce." He tells me stories of the great San Francisco players like Mays, et al. My friend, Mr. Baseball, is holding court.

As we tour the facilities, I see Willie Mays standing by the batting cage talking to a group of players. I tell my friend, "Willie Mays is standing by the cage. Why don't you ask him to sign a ball?" I look over at my friend expecting to see Mr. Baseball swagger out and get it done. Instead, I see a deer standing in the middle of a road transfixed by the headlights of an oncoming



Brett Saberhagen has the "vocabulary."

truck. Where did Mr. Baseball go?

Without thinking, I grab a ball from his hands, walk up to Willie and ask for his autograph. Willie, gracious and accommodating, signs the ball and asks me which team I like this year. Suddenly, I am overcome with a strange feeling kinda like a deer standing in a road transfixed by the headlights of an oncoming truck. Mr. Baseball, help!

I would like to thank Jon Arnold and Bill Murphy for the great tour. If you have a story or anecdote you would like to share, call (562) 425-2449 or write it down (include your name and phone number) and mail it to Ashman & Associates, 3164 North Greenbrier Road, Long Beach, CA 90808. □



An arrow points to Mr. Baseball — the complete package. Photos courtesy: Dave Ashman.