

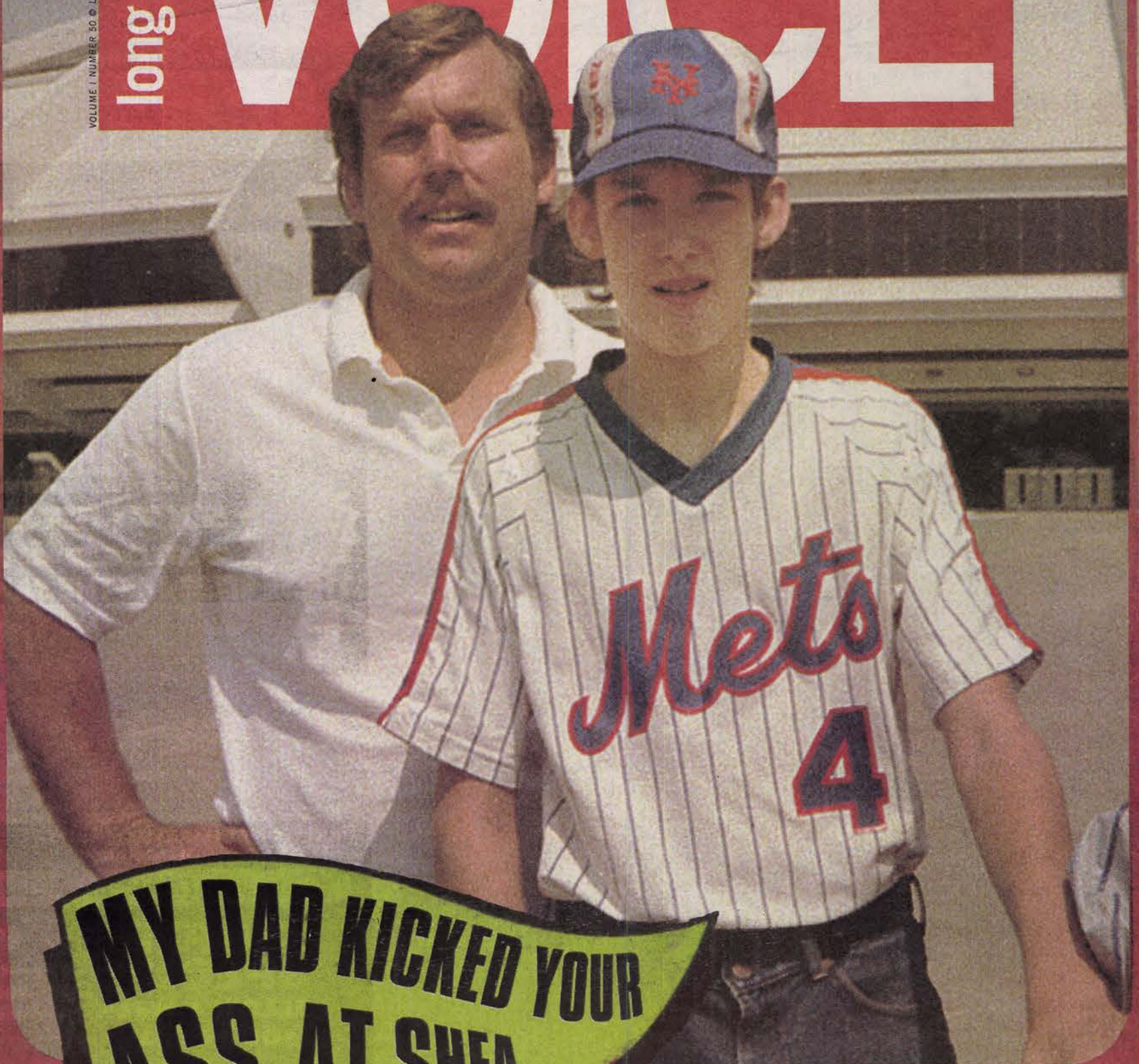
SORTING OUT THE MINOR LEAGUE MESS KELLOGG P8

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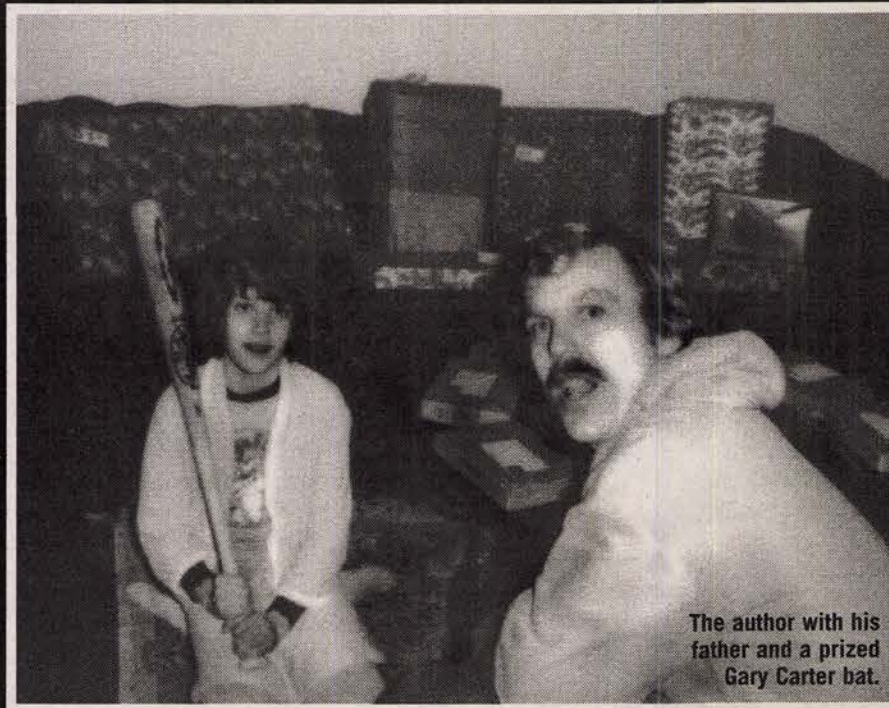


**MY DAD KICKED YOUR
ASS AT SHEA**

BY BILL JENSEN • P13

A BASEBALL MEMOIR

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The author with his father and a prized Gary Carter bat.

MY DAD KICKED YOUR ASS AT SHEA STADIUM

A word to the wise as the season opens next week:
Watch where you sit, pal

Me and my Dad were at some of the biggest games in Long Island sports history. We were there when Bobby Nystrom tipped the puck home for the Isles' first Cup. We ran on the field and got us some turf when the Mets clinched the division in '86, and that piece of sod is decaying in a plastic bag in my basement. We were, of course, at Shea Stadium for the legendary Game 6, courtesy of the scalpers.

The yarns from those big games can sew a tapestry large enough to cover Sid Fernandez' mighty rump. But those aren't the stories we tell around the family campfire in our neck of Nassau. No, the games are only backdrops for our memories. Hearing Bob Costas wax poetic and get all teary-eyed over his vicarious relationship with Mickey Mantle makes us sick. When we tell our greatest sports legends, the players are merely supporting characters in the bigger tales we've lived to tell.

As the season begins next week with the Yankees in Anaheim and the Mets at home against the Phillies, we don't talk about the Opening Day that Gary Carter hit a game-winning homer in his first game as a Met or the year the Yanks opened in a snow flurry. No, we remember the day at Yankee Stadium when Dad smashed some guy's boombox with a full-size bat after the poor sap had accidentally hit me in the head with his souvenir-stand purchase. Or we recall the time the two of us walked into the visitors' bullpen at the Stadium, just to see how far we could get before being thrown out. (Not very far, it turned out.) Or when Dad threatened to throw a guy from the upper deck after he spilled beer on my brand-new Pittsburgh Steelers jacket and refused to help clean it up.

Unfortunately for New York sports fans, my father was as insanely overprotective as I was accident prone. That scene in *Kramer vs. Kramer* in which Dustin Hoffman runs through the streets of Manhattan carrying his kid bleeding from a gaping head wound could have come straight out of our old Super 8 movies. Never mind that our family drama—like yours, no doubt—sometimes played out more like *Kramden vs. Kramden*. As a kid, I got more gashes in my head than I care to remember and when you mix a stitch-collecting kid and 50,000 screaming fans, something's got to give.

Or in our family's case, someone's got to get it.

We kept the violence where it was meant to be—in the stands, English-soccer-fan-style, one hooligan at a time. My dad wasn't the guy running out onto the field trying to tackle the third-base umpire. I didn't stick my glove out and turn a warning track fly into a home run in a playoff game. We didn't throw snowballs onto the field at the Meadowlands.

After watching the Islanders beat the Caps in a 1987 playoff game at the Coliseum, I ran down to the visitors' exit to unleash a verbal assault that would make Cartman blush. As the curses flowed freely from my mouth in the direction of the hated Rod Langway of Washington, I was blindsided with a spear to the jaw by Capitols' forward Lou Franseschetti, who had angled his stick through the crease of the door to pop me in the mouth.

The Caps' players were long gone by the time Dad came down from our seats and found out what happened. His eyes widened, then he jumped into action. Dad was halfway down the tunnel before he was tackled by four of the Coliseum's finest, whom he proceeded to drag along on his back until he was stopped steps from the Caps' locker-room door. How much damage would he have done against 20 guys with sticks and helmets? I did not know, and neither did he. I know I thought it was pretty cool. It was just another night for a son who was fanatical about going to the big game and a father who was fanatical about getting him there.

WHY MY FATHER IS SUCH A GOOD SPORT

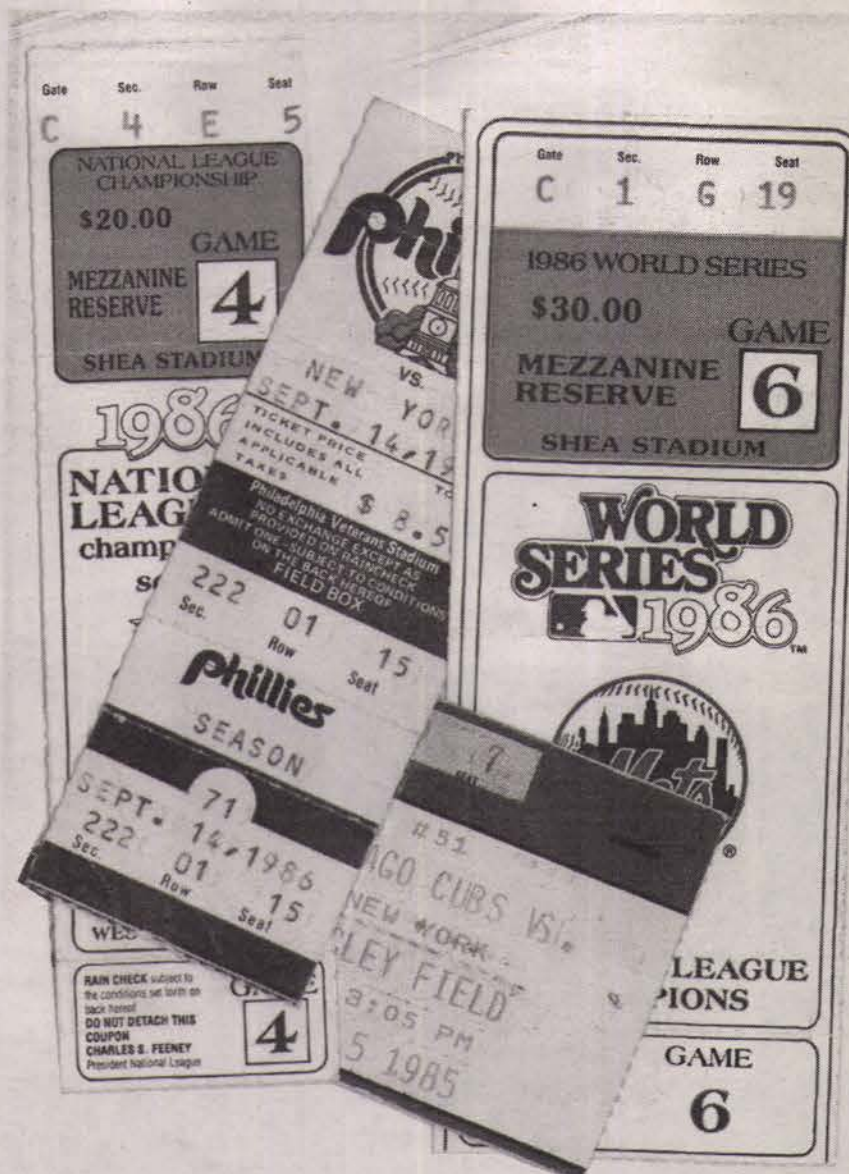
Dad took me to all the games that he never got to go to as a kid. His father paid little attention to him, and the lack of warmth in his East Meadow baby-boom household cast him and his brothers into the leather jacket/greaser mold of the early '60s. By 14, he was running with gangs like The Jesters and The Asphalt Angels, spending his nights rumbling on the streets of East Meadow and Bellmore.

When he was 15, he was on the losing end of a fight with his high-school gym teacher.

"I came home and told my dad that my gym teacher beat me up," my father told me. "I thought he was going to make a big deal out of it." Instead, his father told him, "You probably deserved it." Dad made up his mind that if that ever happened to his kid, he would go down to the gym "and put the guy through the basketball hoop."

At 15, he decided to bolt and took a bus to California, where he lived on his own, parking cars and selling encyclopedias door to door. He returned to Long Island as a young man and had settled down a bit by the time I was born. He had his own painting contracting company and not only wanted something better for me but wanted to give me—and him—the childhood he never had. Until I became a sports fan as a young boy, he never had much time to be a spectator. He started to take notice as my interest grew and that made every game we scammed our way into that much more fun.

His life as a house painter gave my father Popeye-like forearms, which, coupled with his just-this-side-of Nick Nolte demeanor, gave him a fittingly riveting presence. He's not a violent man, but there were moments every so often at the stadiums (in retrospect, very so often) when someone would cross him. As a



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kid, these instances seemed rare, but after a while, I could diagram the action as clearly as a sentence in English class. First came *The Look*, the kind of look Bill Bixby gave on *The Incredible Hulk* TV show before he slowly said, "Don't make me angry... you won't like me when I'm angry." But my father didn't have to say anything to get the idea across. *The Look* was almost always enough to make the other guy back down. But not always. There was a more than ample supply of guys out there who thought they were as bad as him. If anyone dared to push him after *The Look*, it was go-time. For that, he had few takers.

His protective streak came into play in other arenas as well. My two half-sisters still talk about the time he accompanied them to a 1970s Jose Feliciano concert at the Eisenhower Park bandshell, where he almost brawled with a guy who got too close to their blanket. My mother actually witnessed that spectator-to-spectator confrontation. She usually heard of our other adventures weeks after the fact, laughing them off.

Once when I was 14, we were sitting on the field level at Shea and spotted some prime box seats right behind third base going cold. We snagged two and enjoyed the game featuring the surging '85 Mets until two guys in suits showed up in the fifth inning. Guys in suits at a sporting event represented just about everything my father hated about the world at large and about sports in particular. They probably got their tickets as office freebies. So their attire was strike one. And then these two started digging themselves a deeper hole.

"We know these aren't your seats," one of them said smugly, "but we'll let you sit here because you're a Lenny Dykstra fan." I was wearing my Mets jersey with Dykstra's number 4.

As the game went on, I got into a small argument with the two guys over the merits of the game-winning-RBI as a meaningful statistic. I acknowledged its imperfections, but took the pro side. Dad cast a few sidelong glances of derision in the direction of the whiny, nasal voices arguing with me from behind. He shook his head meaningfully, as if he knew they'd eventually push him too far. Hearing me getting dissed by those two bozos was like pouring gasoline on a fire, and they remained too dopey to realize it. I, however, could sense something was coming.

In the seventh inning, a fight broke out 15 rows back and Dad stood up to watch the fans brawl.

"Sit down," said one of our new businessman pals.

"Go fuck yourself," my father replied. He tried to ignore them, but as you can see, these were not smart businessmen. At this point, he wasn't sitting down for anybody, and certainly not for two guys who got in for free.

"Sit down, we're trying to watch the game here," said one. This was also a mistake.

"What inspired you to wear suits to a game?" my father belted as he braced for a confrontation. He must have said it in his especially intimate way because his tone was enough to get heads swiveling toward our box, away from the spot where two guys were actually trading blows.

We turned to sit down, but since we had such good seats, two guards showed up real quick. People in surrounding boxes pointed him out as the troublemaker.

My father, no longer red in the face, was insulted.

"You're going to need more than you two to get me out of here," he told the guards, never looking away from the game. He calmly sipped his beer.

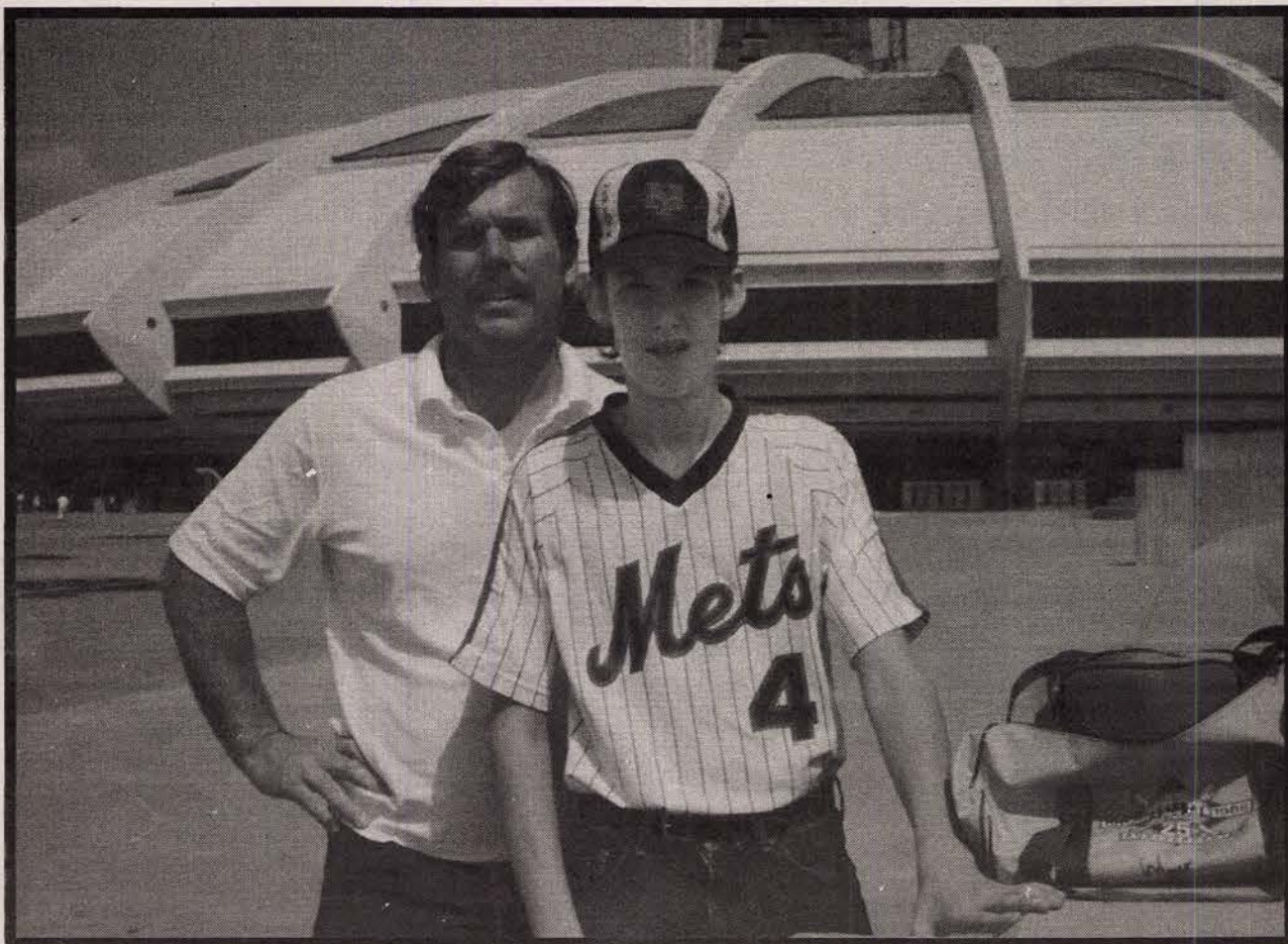
Two more guards were dispatched, but Dad silently shook his head. He made no threats—it was just clear he wasn't going unless he felt they gave him enough reason. Nothing personal. It's just that every man has his pride.

It took eight guards to surround us before he felt satisfied enough to leave quietly. The crowd was silent as we were walked out. Rather than be disappointed with having to leave, at that moment I was proud to be my father's son. He had stood up for what was right, and he didn't have to wear a necktie to prove he was somebody.

His reign of fan terror could not be contained to New York. When we traveled to Montreal to see the Mets play a three-game series at Olympic Stadium, we were walking past a bus when Dad was hit with a shower of beer meant for my brand-new Dykstra jersey. My father answered the charge by climbing up to the bus window and spitting in the Quebecer's face.

SCALPING 101: DON'T FORGET THE BAIL MONEY

I knew I was different from other kids very early on in my spectating career. Before every game, one of my tasks was to look out for cops as Dad bought seats from scalpers in the parking lot. As all the other kids walked briskly through the gate, we stood outside



Bill Jensen Sr. and the author at Olympic Stadium, 1986.

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making deals with beady-eyed men in stained Starter jackets. Soon we became preferred customers to certain scalpers, who no longer had to deny selling us tickets because Dad, though never a fan of the cops, insisted on maintaining a police-issue mustache.

To us, season tickets were a sucker's play. Who wants to sit in the same seat every game? Scalpers are conveniently found outside every arena. And while Dad and I might have gotten a little excited while viewing a game, we clearly kept things in perspective. Who's crazy enough to sleep on the sidewalk for three days for a chance to buy a ticket?

Only once did my father sleep under the stars for a game, before the '81 Cup finals. It was a waste of time. He actually ended up organizing what could have been a riot and created a list to prevent line-jumpers. He was 13th in line and got seats so high in the Uniondale air that we could have been watching a New York Arrows game and wouldn't have known the difference. After that debacle, he said to hell with this and became the scalper's best friend.

My father's rules for buying tickets from scalpers are simple:

1. Carry a seating plan ripped out of the *Yellow Pages* as your bullshit detector, because in the scalper's mind, every seat is right behind the dugout.

2. Never take the first price.

3. Make sure you're carrying bail money in case you get pinched during the transaction.

Listening to WCBS-FM oldies in our vintage Chrysler Cordoba on the way to the game, I used to have an uneasy feeling about not having tickets. But after a while, I had faith in both Dad and the scalpers, the same way I learned to trust his instincts in grandstand confrontations. Before they stopped selling alcohol two hours after the game starts and a beer was actually affordable, he would indulge. I never worried about it. Thinking back, I should have been scared shitless every time he sparked a drunken argument, but because he had protected me so successfully through the years, I felt invincible at his side.

What fear I had was not for me, but for him. Guys who started fights at games usually traveled in packs of threes or fours. My father was the exception. Most guys out to enjoy the game with their kid would walk away from a confrontation. Not him. This worried me. What if one of these guys pulled a gun or a knife? What would happen if my father got arrested? Despite all

the times he was challenged though, I always remember that he never went to blows. I think about that a lot when I look back on those days. The other guys always backed down or—even more lily-livered—called security. After a while, the only thing I regretted whenever my father stood up to back someone down was that I wasn't big enough to stand shoulder to shoulder and back him up.

OUR FAMILY HIGHLIGHT REEL

I came home from school during the '86 Series and Dad said we were going to the game. Which was in Boston. We raced to LaGuardia and my heart was pounding as we made our way onto the Grand Central. Two hours after school let out, we were on the Eastern shuttle with no tickets to a game that any Beantowner would burn his Pudge Fisk rookie card to attend. We had been through this so many times by then that I walked through Logan Airport with the assurance of a Fenway Park season-ticket holder. Only we were not suckers. We found a guy selling seats in Kenmore Square, walked down Lansdowne Street to the ballpark and sat down in seats on the first-base line. We hadn't even broken a sweat. The Mets lost, setting up the once-in-a-lifetime drama of Game 6 at Shea.

The only time we didn't find scalpers at a game was outside the '83 Cup finals at the Coliseum. The big chunk of rock in the parking lot where all the scalpers traditionally converge to find buyers was filled only with a gaggle of fans hoping for a miracle. My dad had been in the hospital throughout the entire playoffs with heart trouble—endocarditis—and had been released just in time for the final game. But it looked like we would be shut out.

On the cusp of despair, we spotted a guy looking at his watch—then out at the parking lot, then at his watch, then out at the parking lot.

"Your friend's not showing up," Dad said to the stranger.

"I told that son of a bitch to be here by seven," the guy said. "Otherwise, I'm going to go in without him. I'm giving him five more minutes. If he doesn't show, I'll sell you the seats."

It was the longest five minutes of our lives. But we got into the building, after the introductions and before the National Anthem, to see the Islanders hoist their last Stanley Cup. To the guy who was late that night: Thanks for the memories.

When we weren't buying from scalpers, we were slipping the legitimate box-office attendants an extra 10 bucks for the best seats. Before they computerized everything, we used to have the Yankee Stadium ticket guys shuffling from booth to booth looking for those prime seats on the third-base line. And when all else failed, we could always grease the usher's palm and move down to the corporate boxes.

For the really big games, we took extreme measures. When we sought our '86 Series tickets, the cloak-and-dagger protocol called for me to wait in the car outside a LaGuardia Airport hotel while Dad made a phone call to a secret number. He was then given the location of a room where the tickets were being sold. Fifteen-hundred bucks later, he walked out with seats for Games Six and Seven. Even I thought that was too much to spend to see a baseball game, but it didn't matter to him.

He first decided to start saving money for my college education at ballgames, when he would listen to me spout off Wally Backman's on-base percentage. I was the first kid in his family to go beyond high school, and eventually got a master's degree in religious studies. On the field of life, Dad and I sometimes find ourselves worlds apart. He considers spending time in bars discussing the comparative merits of different faiths a serious waste of beer. But that's how I spent my time in graduate school. I write for a living, and he made his by working his body mercilessly, day in and day out.

Dad's been pretty sick lately, so our days at the ballpark will not be as frequent this season. But when we make the journey to a stadium glowing under the lights and make our way up the ramps just in time to hear the lineups being announced, we don't have to say anything to know we're in this together, a double-play combo as sure-handed as any since Santana to Backman.

HOW WE PLAY THE GAME

My wife gave birth to our first child three weeks ago and I relish the opportunity to take my daughter to games one day. If there's one thing I learned from my father, it's that you do everything in your power to get your kids to the places they want to go. I dragged him to the first Wrestlemania at Madison Square Garden. So if my girl Zoe happens to become a huge NASCAR fan, I'll get her to Daytona in February. If she—tragically—grows up being a huge Broadway fan, I'll get her center orchestra for *Showboat*.

But what will I do if some guy bumps into her with a hot-dog cart outside the theater? Will I go postal? I don't know—although I did put a dent in the door of a cab that tried to nudge my wife to move faster in a crosswalk in Las Vegas last fall. I may not go nuts as often as he did, but I know I have it in me.

One Saturday when I was 15, I played in a high-school hockey game at the freezing cold arena at Mitchel Field. The start of the game was delayed because the other team didn't have enough players on the ice. But we were told they were dressing frantically in the locker room. Instead of waiting, the referee blew his whistle and yelled, "That's it—forget it!" and started to skate off the ice. I looked up at Dad sitting with all the other weary parents freezing their asses off in the stands at 6 a.m. I lost it.

I took off my helmet and skated toward the ref, screaming.

"Where the fuck do you have to go, you fat pig? Just wait the five minutes and let us play the game!"

The stunned ref stopped in his tracks at the dasher boards at rink's edge. He just glared at me in silence. He couldn't have known what was coming next, but even in my rage I felt certain that I knew what to do. This guy had been disrespectful, and I had been taught that a man rights that kind of wrong. I tore off my helmet and charged at him. When I got close enough, I swung my helmet at the glass behind him, deliberately missing his face by a few inches.

"Let's go!" I said, rolling up my sleeves and balling my fists.

"Let's give 'em a show."

That's when he got scared. I could see it in the way his eyes bugged out and his eyebrows jumped. We all knew who was in charge now.

"Number twenty, you're gone," he announced shakily before skating off the ice to a chorus of boos.

The two teams played a makeshift scrimmage. When I walked off the ice, Dad met me on the way to the lockers. I apologized for making him get up so early on a Saturday to see a bullshit practice.

He was at my side when he turned and said, "You reminded me of me." I saw the hint of a grin on his face, but he didn't break stride.

I went inside to change and we didn't say much of anything on the ride home. What's there to say when things are the way they are supposed to be?

We still go to games, though not with the fanatical drive of yesteryear. The next time you're at Shea, you may see us sitting in the boxes behind third base. Stop by and say hello. But please, be careful in the crowd. Don't bump into me or spill your drink in my direction. You might get my father angry.

You won't like him when he's angry.

