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AN ULTRASTRONG SILENT TYPE

BOSTON'S JIM RICE, WHOSE 46 HOME RUNS AND 139 RBIS LED THE MAJORS LAST YEAR, IS ANOTHER OF THE NEW MILLIONAIRES, BUT IT IS BEST NOT TO QUESTION HIM ABOUT IT

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The blessing fell with heavy irony on the lowered heads of the gentlemen from the Southern Bank & Trust Company of Greenville, S.C. "We are fortunate to have Jim Rice with us here today," the minister advised 250 diners at the Charleston Chamber of Commerce's Red Carpet Breakfast Meeting, "through the courtesy of Southern Bank & Trust." Only the blushing bankers knew at that moment just how unfortunate the chamber folks really were, because there would be no Rice at breakfast this day.

That melancholy intelligence had been conveyed to them the night before, smack in the middle of an impromptu party in the suite of Board Chairman Sam Hunt at the Kiawah Island Inn outside Charleston. They had been having a high time of it until then. Thomas (Nap) Vandiver, their fun-loving board chairman emeritus and spiritual leader, had been singing basso profundo and recounting convoluted anecdotes about his undergraduate years at The Citadel, while outside, the thumping January surf played timpani to the trumpeting laughter. They thought that Rice, the American League's Most Valuable Player and part-time Southern Bank public-relations man, would soon be with them to help out with a series of promotional events, the breakfast included. Then, just when the party was getting a glow on, the telephone rang.

Senior Vice-President Phil Southerland, hair slightly ruffled, spectacles fastened to the tip of his nose, answered. His countenance went slack. Rice, he was told, had that day signed a seven-year contract with the Red Sox worth approximately $5.4 million. Because of this epochal transaction, Rice could not get out of Boston that night and would not be in Carolina in the morning. Southern Bank this year is paying Rice $25,000 for his P.R. work, so the economic priorities were obvious enough, but the fact remained that the bankers were left holding, as it were, the bag.

"What'll we do at the chamber breakfast tomorrow?" a crestfallen Hunt asked Southerland.

"Maybe," the senior veep replied, "we could have Nap sing Amazing Grace."

As it developed, there was no need for that appalling alternative. Rice was not around for Jim Rice Day in Charleston, but the locals were able to hear his views expressed secondhand via a telephone-loudspeaker hookup with Tony Pennacchia, the slugger's attorney, agent, golfing buddy and, on this occasion, mouthpiece. "Tony, you're talking to about 250-300 people here in Charleston. South Carolina," Southerland began uncomfortably. "And you," replied Pennacchia, "are talking to a little Italian lawyer from Providence, Rhode Island."

It was a piece of cake from then on. Rice, tired but dead game, arrived later that afternoon, in time to play a few holes of golf with bank customers and to appear that evening at a dinner for bank directors. The golf was highlighted by some heroic Rice teeshots that flew off into distant treetops and various bodies of water thereabouts. At the banquet, the subject was, not unexpectedly, filthy lucre. For all of his protestations to the contrary, Rice is keenly interested in the stuff; in the company of men whose business is money, he was in his element. As a native South Carolinian, he was also on his home turf. Rice has a cannonade oratorical style, the words exploding in salvos. He is not always easy to follow, but he was in good form this night, although his attachment to the archaic suffix "wise" bordered on an addiction. The "wises" tumbled forth from him in amazing profusion—executivewise, salarywise, residencewise, investmentwise.... He was a replica, languagewise, of a 1960s advertising executive.

The bankers drank in the wises and the wisdom. Of his new riches, Rice remarked, "If someone gives you X amount of dollars, are you going to say, 'No, I don't want it'? This is the thing a player looks forward to—security.... It's not how much you make; it's how much you can keep for yourself. Instead of spending two pennies, I'm trying to save four. If I had gone to free agency, I could have made more, but I went this way because it's better for me and my family. And at age 32 [which is when his new contract expires], I can go through it all over again. Anytime you can get a contract the way you want it, you'd better take it."

Rice explained why he felt an obligation to come all the way down to South Carolina when his principal business that week was in Boston. "I have a contract with Southern Bank. I have an obligation to it. When I sign something, I live up to it."

This last declaration of loyalty moved a bank director, H. C. (Bunt) Fisk, to rise to his feet and, in a voice fairly quivering with emotion, inquire, "Jim, do you sense something here tonight? I do. I don't think you sense envy. I don't. I feel a sense of admiration."

The breakfast aside, Rice had on this important day of his life fulfilled an obligation to his banking friends. He had rescued these merry and decent men from a potentially embarrassing dilemma and established himself in their minds as not just a superb ballplayer but as a man of honor. The next day he would not do himself quite so proud.

For reasons not entirely clear, even to Rice himself, he has an unfortunate penchant for being rude and unpleasant to newspaper reporters and even, heaven forfend, to television interviewers. He obviously subscribes to the dictum, memorably advanced by the late Humphrey Bogart, that all a performer owes his public is a good performance. On the afternoon following his banquet speech, Rice represented the bank at the opening of a new branch in Charleston. A press conference had been called for the occasion, and the first reporter to arrive was Jim Laise of the Charleston News and Courier. Laise is 25, only three years out of West Virginia University, and was preppy-looking this day in a dark wool sweater and white shirt. The assignment did not seem especially difficult because Rice, whose home is only a few hundred miles from Charleston, in Anderson, is virtually a local boy. Rice was signing baseballs in the office of branch manager Rick Hawkins when Laise strolled confidently in, notebook in hand.

"May we talk now?" he began. Stony silence.

Laise suggested that as a famous ballplayer, Rice was, like it or not, in the public eye. Did he not owe people something of himself? "My name is nothing," was the clipped reply. "You're paid by your credentials. My statistics show I deserve what I'm getting. What am I supposed to do, say, 'No, I'm not worth it. Take it back.' Would you?"

Laise allowed as how he certainly would not reject 5.4 million dollars, or even 5.4 dollars, but his mild jest did not serve, as surely Laise hoped it would, to loosen up the dour Rice. The interview continued in this adversarial vein for 20 minutes, with Rice responding to even the most innocuous questions as if they were accusations of wrongdoing.

"You seem pretty abrasive," Laise finally ventured. "If this job didn't mean so much to me, I wouldn't be here."

"Right, but you're doing this on my time," Rice said. "If this wasn't for the bank, I wouldn't be here either."

But wouldn't the bank prefer him to be more cooperative with the press, because he is their representative?

"If more people were more direct," this would be a better world," said Rice. "Too many people want to play games, beat you around the bush. When I dislike someone, I tell them. But I always tell them why. If you give a reason, then maybe people will say, 'Hey, maybe he's right. Maybe I was wrong.' Now take you; you started off bad by asking me the same old thing about $5.4 million...."

"But...it's news."

"Tell me, what do you do with people you don't like?"

"I avoid them," said Laise, folding his notebook.

After this contentious interview, Rice signed autographs and chatted with local youngsters for two hours. He was unfailingly polite, if not exactly ebullient.

A few weeks later, in Boston, Ken Harrelson, the former slugger who is now a Red Sox broadcaster, discussed his friend and golfing partner, Rice. "Jimmy is almost too good to be true," said Harrelson. "He's a kind of Frank Merriwell. I have a 12-year-old son, and I just hope he can grow up to be the person Jim Rice is. Jimmy is such a good kid—except for this one thing with the press. If he could only cultivate or even tolerate the media better. He's so thoughtful with everybody but writers. As a former player, I know what the media can do for you. The press made a personality out of me. If only Jimmy could portray himself to the writers the way he really is, if he could only get that charisma across."

"Jimmy has a smile that will make you melt," says Pennacchia, a short, glib man of 34, "and a frown that will make you cringe. Deep down he's a real nice kid. But what have you got here? You've got a 26-year-old, a black, from South Carolina, who finds himself in the intellectual capital of the world. He's aware of his shortcomings. He'll get older, more mature, better with the press."

Rice complains that he was misrepresented last year in a Sport magazine article that had him charging the Red Sox with racism. But he is equally testy about more trivial transgressions and, in fact, does not even tolerate criticism, justified or not, of his teammates. He sometimes overreacts, says Harrelson, because of his sensitive, perceptive nature. These traits, Harrelson concedes, are not always immediately apparent. "It's like you're going into a bar looking for some action," Harrelson said, roaming far afield for an analogy. "Well, the first thing that draws you to a lady is her physical attractiveness. With Jimmy, the first thing you notice is his great strength. Then, after a while, if you talk to the lady and find she's not only pretty but smart, you've really got something. It's that way with Jimmy. Talk to him, and you find he's smarter than he is strong."

If that is so, then Rice should be on the faculty at MIT as well as a member of the Red Sox, because he is widely considered the strongest man in baseball. His majestic home runs are certainly a good measure of his power—one of his clouts last season departed Fenway and descended to the street an estimated 650 feet from home plate—but a swing he took several years ago in Detroit at a ball he did not hit may be an even more accurate gauge. Rice checked that hefty cut, and the bat came apart in his hands, as if he had smashed it against a concrete wall. On the golf course, where his drives are also legendary—former U.S. Open Champion Lou Graham says Rice hits longer than anyone on the pro tour—he has snapped at least three clubs on the downswing. Harrelson saw him do it with a Triple X (extra-stiff) shaft driver. "All he came down with was the grip," says Harrelson.

In baseball, according to Harrelson, "there are strong guys, real strong guys and ultrastrong guys—your Mantles and Frank Howards. I saw Howard hit a ball so hard the stitching just came undone. The ball looked like it was going 800 feet, but then it just stopped and fluttered to the ground. It just couldn't take it. Jimmy is in that category." In fact, when SPORTS ILLUSTRATED recently polled baseball experts, asking them to choose between Pirate Dave Parker and Rice as the game's best player, a majority selected Parker, mainly because of his expertise as a fielder and his speed. Among those who picked Rice, his strength—his ability to drive the ball high and long—was usually the deciding factor in his favor.

At 6'2", 205 pounds, Rice is not as imposing physically as those Brobdingnagians, Howard and Parker, but he has powerful arms and feline reflexes. His swing is swift and compact. He is among the most fearless as well as feared hitters in the game, because he will stand his ground against the fiercest brushback artist. For that matter, he may be at his most dangerous after being hit or threatened by a pitch. And, as his four-year major league batting average of .306 attests, he is not exclusively a power hitter.

Rice and Pennacchia could not have picked a better time to renegotiate a contract than at the conclusion of last season. Rice led the major leagues with 213 hits, 46 homers, 139 runs batted in, 15 triples and a slugging percentage of .600. With 406 total bases, he became the first American Leaguer to have more than 400 since Joe DiMaggio in 1937. He became the first hitter in either league to have the outright lead in homers, triples and RBIs in the same season. Thirty of his homers either tied games or gave the Red Sox the lead, and he had 21 game-winning RBIs. He batted .315 for the season and .339 with men on base. He set Red Sox records for total bases, at bats and games played, appearing in all 163. He easily won the league's MVP award over the Yankees' Ron Guidry, whose 25-3 pitching record would have won for him in most seasons. If ever a player had cause to argue for a raise, Rice did in 1978.

Actually, Pennacchia first approached the Red Sox in the autumn of 1977 about adjusting Rice's old contract, which paid him about $125,000 for 1978 and would have expired after the 1980 season, when Rice will be only 27. As negotiations intensified last season, there was some question if the new owners—Tom Yawkey's widow Jean, Haywood Sullivan and Buddy LeRoux—could even afford a player of Rice's then inestimable worth. But money apparently never was a serious obstacle in the prolonged negotiations. Not that it didn't come up. "The figures went anywhere from many, many millions to only a few, and the length of the contract from 12 years to three," says Sullivan. "We could afford the man, and Jim is not the type who wants to make one dollar more than the next highest player. Frankly, you like to take care of your own. This organization has always had a player the fans could identify with, a Williams or a Yaz, and now Jim is the key to our club."

With Rice's signature safely on the contract, Sullivan feels free to boast openly about his most expensive property. "Jim Rice has unlimited potential," he says. "Even Ted Williams is in awe of him." Sullivan's encomiums extend to 'Rice's rarely exercised defensive skills. "Jim can do the job in the outfield, a damn good job. He just hasn't been able to get rid of that stigma that he's a lousy outfielder. The fact is, with Carl Yastrzemski, Fred Lynn and Dwight Evans, we have three great defensive outfielders. It's tough to break in there." As a result, Rice's principal position has been designated hitter. He plays it with minimal complaint, because, as Sox Manager Don Zimmer has said of him, "He's a manager's player." But team insiders expect Rice to play more in leftfield and Yaz more at first base this season. Like most DHs, Rice feels he hits better when playing both ways, and if that is true, then his prospects are awesome. And it is significant that in his rookie season, 1975, he played 90 games in the outfield and committed no errors.

To be sure, fielding averages—even Rice's lofty 1.000 in '75—can be misleading. Exceptional defensive players will often commit more errors than poor fielders, because the better players reach more balls and dare to try more difficult plays. But Rice's tours of duty in the outfield have shown that he is no butcher: in fact, he may be somewhat better than average. Although his range and arm are limited, he catches virtually every ball he gets to and has shown surprising dedication—considering that he is only a part-time fielder—in working on his fielding. This would seem to make him an ideal man to play the compact left-field in Fenway Park, the position he will sooner or later inherit from Yaz. The main requirement of that job is a mastery of playing balls off the wall, and sure-handedness and diligence would appear to be just the attributes needed to attain that proficiency. It would not be at all surprising if, when Rice's current contract comes up for renewal in 1985, he were able to argue that he, like his predecessors Williams and Yaz, is a substantial defensive asset because of his ability to play the Green Monster.

As for his future off the field, "There is no reason why Jim shouldn't be financially secure for the rest of his life," says Pennacchia. "If he's not, it'll be either his fault or mine, mainly mine, because he's such a conservative kid. He's a penny pincher. The only way he's extravagant is with clothes and cars. And that figures, because he never had much of those when he was a kid."

James Edward Rice was the fourth of nine children. His father Roger was a supervisor for the True Temper Company, and Jim, or Ed, as he was then called, lived only 100 yards from a playground. He was an all-sports star, first at West-side High and then at Hanna. He was also

Rice signed with the Red Sox after graduation in June of 1971 and was married the next year to Corine Gilliard, a girl he knew at Westside High. They have an infant son with the distinctly Bostonian name of Chauncy. Although they live in Anderson during the off-season, Boston suits the Rices well. "It's a clean city," says Rice, "and it has history, food and fashion." Corine has been attending junior college classes, and Rice, too, has sought counsel toward improving his verbal and accounting skills. "You have to learn how to talk," he says, "and find out what money can do for you."

At its 40th annual dinner on Jan. 25, the Boston chapter of the Baseball Writers Association honored Rice as the Red Sox' Most Valuable Player. He sat at the head table, a handsome, mustachioed figure in a pearl-gray suit with wide lapels, listening attentively to countless speeches and the presentations of numberless awards. Among those honored was Willie Mays, elected that week to the Hall of Fame. Mays said he regretted calling himself "the greatest player I ever saw," after he had heard of his election to the Hall, but still believed that to be true.

Then, "If there is a fellow in our midst who can achieve what Willie Mays did," said master of ceremonies Dick Stockton, "it's Jim Rice." A short film was shown of Rice hitting homers and making diving catches, and then Larry Whiteside, chairman of the Boston chapter, introduced the guest of honor. Whiteside wryly observed that he and Rice arrived in New England about the same time. "Now he's got about five million, and I get to cover the Celtics." He looked down the long table at an impassive Rice. "Jim sometimes gets a little mad at us," he continued, "but no member of the press can ever break him. I give you Jim Rice!"

The writers and their guests rose to applaud him. Rice seemed almost embarrassed. Had Whiteside's words worked as a peace offering between the player and his chroniclers? Rice leaned forward and, unsmiling, began his acceptance speech: "Even though I give writers a bad time, the only reason is that they come to Jim Rice to talk about everything but baseball —my love life or whatever.... Now you talk to me about baseball, I'll talk to you like a man...."

These things take time.

ILLUSTRATION

Along with leading in homers and RBIs, Rice topped the big leagues with 213 hits, a .600 slugging percentage, 406 total bases—which were the most in 30 years—and 15 triples, a big number for a player who's not usually fleet.