

## BASEBALL

## CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS

**Cal Ripken and Kirby Puckett weren't swayed by number status; they settled for less to stay home**

By PETER PASCARELLI

**Y**ou don't hear much talk nowadays in baseball about traditional virtues such as loyalty and community. They're about as rare as a player asking for a pay cut.

More than 350 players changed teams last offseason. Players who spend their entire careers in one city can be counted on one hand. And though the lust for free-agent money is a big reason for all this mercenary movement, teams are just as guilty. Because of budgets and because of the need to make some off-season news, clubs are more than willing to shuffle bodies to and fro.

Then there's the tale of two guys named Kirby Puckett and Cal Ripken Jr., who had the chance to leave their towns and didn't, whose ties to their communities in Baltimore and Minneapolis-St. Paul were so strong that they signed for what undoubtedly was less than what they would have commanded had they played out their free-agent opportunities.

Let's hasten to add that there's no need to take up a collection for Puckett or Ripken. Both ended up signing contracts that will pay \$30 million over the next five seasons. Cynics surely will ask what difference another few million might make.

Tell that to the majority of players who worked the market to squeeze every possible dime out of free agency.

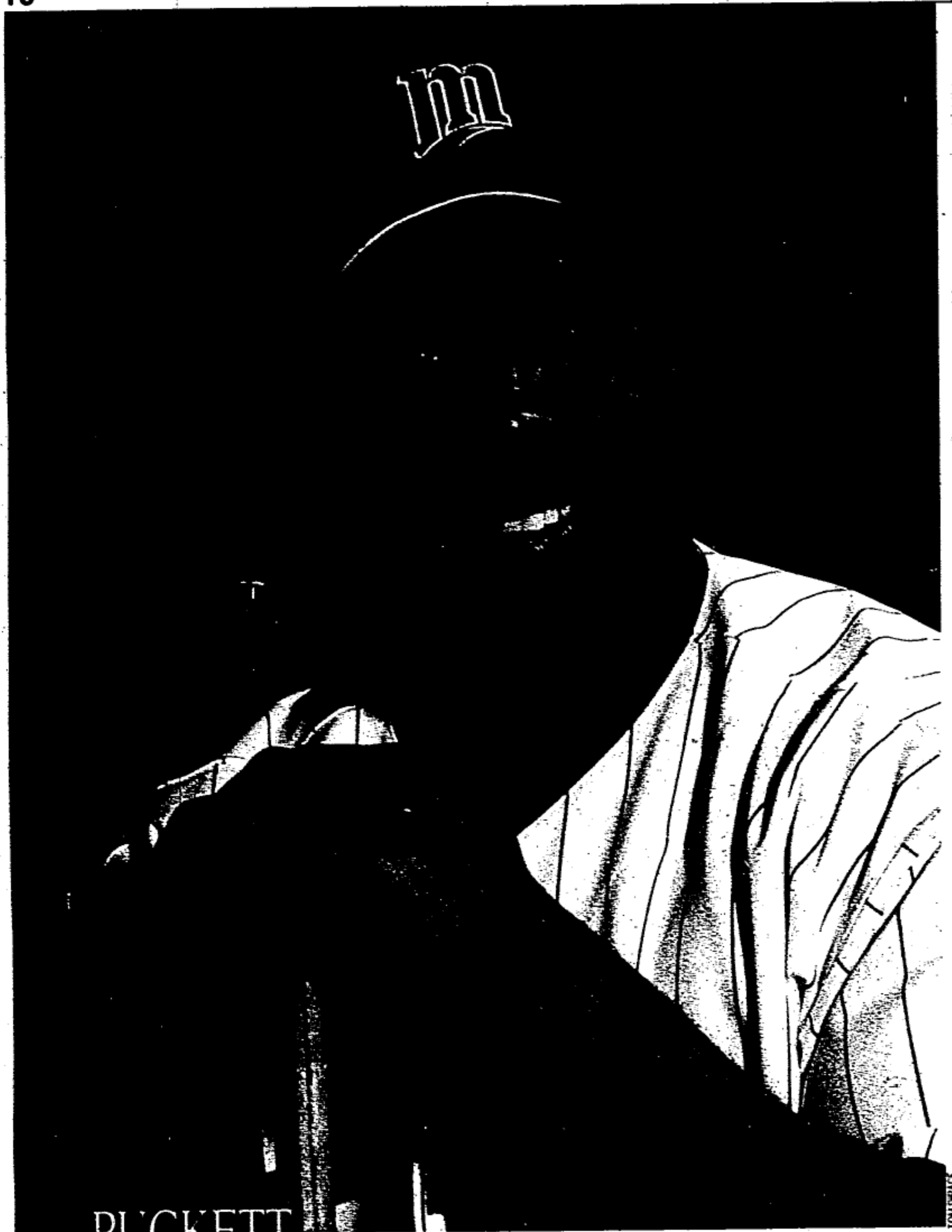
The fact is these were two special cases last season, two players of superstar magnitude who could have written their own ticket and elected instead to limit their options because they were happy where they played.

If that sounds unremarkable, then you haven't been following professional sports the last few years.

## RIPKEN

"Baseball had always been something that separated us as a family because my dad was away so much when I was a kid. Then baseball became something that brought us all back together."

Due to a lack of photographic contrast, this page did not



## PUCKETT

"I knew guys would probably get more than what I signed for with the Twins. But I bet five or six years from now, I'm going to be a lot happier."

Ripken never filed for free agency, signing his contract with Baltimore late last season after negotiations consumed nearly a year. Puckett re-signed with Minnesota last winter after filing for free agency and opening negotiations with at least two other teams — Boston and Philadelphia.

How much more would they have gotten if they had the free-agent dollar game to the limit? That's difficult to gauge, especially in Ripken's case.

Coincidentally, Puckett and Ripken are represented by Baltimore attorney Ron Shapiro, one of the top half-dozen baseball agents. Shapiro has long been known within baseball as one of the more reasonable agents with which to deal. But, like anyone in his business, his first obligation is the bottom line — something he tended to over the last year to the tune of more than \$80 million worth of contracts.

"It's tougher to judge whether Cal would have gotten more on the open market than he ended up signing for," Shapiro says.

"If his season had not been as difficult for him and he had put up his usual numbers, I think he might have gotten more on the open market. Don't forget that he is a shortstop, a position that is much in demand. And he is a remarkably durable talent.

"Kirby's situation is a little better to figure. Given the way the market went last winter, Kirby clearly would have gotten offers of at least \$35 million and quite probably even higher."

Shapiro, who has been doing baseball contracts for nearly 20 years, says the situations of Puckett and Ripken made for the toughest deals he has had to negotiate.

"Both had their own complications, but the two situations were quite similar in many ways," Shapiro says.

"First of all, for both men, this was easily the biggest business de-

cision they would likely make in their lives. But they were very emotional decisions. They both have very deep ties within the community.

"Kirby has a ticket program in the community in which he buys and distributes over 30,000 tickets. He also is active in all kinds of charities. Cal has helped create an adult literacy program in the city plus a ticket program and extensive charitable involvement. These are real commitments these guys have in their cities.

"Plus, they have built great relationships with the fans which are unique nowadays. These are two players who totally identified with the cities in which they perform.

"Any one of those aspects represents very powerful pulls on the player. Taken together, they represented from my point of view the greatest challenge I've ever had in this business."

Puckett's negotiations began during spring training last season, and early in the summer he was ready to accept an offer of \$27.5 million over five years. "I was all set to sign then, even though Ron warned me that it was below what the market might bring," Puckett says. "But I wanted it done and I wanted to stay in Minnesota and I was taking all that into consideration."

However, at the last minute, Twins Owner Carl Pohlad took the offer off the table and talks virtually ceased.

"Kirby didn't allow it to affect him on the field," Shapiro says. "It was clear to anyone that he wanted to remain in Minnesota. And I think most people expected that in the end, the Twins would not chance exposing him to other clubs."

However, the Twins let the clock run and Puckett took the plunge by filing for free agency. "I never stopped wanting to stay with the Twins, but there reached a point where I had to protect myself on the business side," Puckett says.

"And once I filed, I owed it to myself to see what was out there. If for some reason the Twins weren't going to be there for me, I had to look for the best situation that might be out there."

Shapiro was faced with some obstacles on the open market. "On the one hand, Kirby and I made the decision that we would not have any club make us a financial offer until we had decided to make a commitment to them," Shapiro says. "And Kirby also felt strongly about not making any teams feel used, which is why we wanted to visit the cities secretly. That didn't work because our visits got into the papers.

"No one would believe that Kirby actually would leave Minnesota. That's why we started visiting clubs that had expressed some interest. We had to see if the interest was real."

Puckett was pleasantly surprised with what he found. He visited Boston, and the Red Sox came away with the definite feeling they had a shot. "We definitely felt that if Kirby wasn't going to stay in Minnesota, we had an excellent chance to sign him," Red Sox General Manager Lou Gorman says.

And Puckett came away from his visit to Philadelphia feeling good about the Phillies. "I really liked the idea of the Phillies," Puckett says. "For one thing, a lot of their guys like Lenny Dykstra, John Kruk, Darren Daulton and Dave Hollins are my kind of players, all out from the first pitch."

Phillies General Manager Lee Thomas maintains the Phillies never made Puckett a firm offer. But Thomas and Owner Bill Giles made it clear through repeated calls to Puckett and Shapiro how interested they were.

Philadelphia and Boston were believed ready to make five-year, \$35-million offers when Puckett returned home to Minnesota for some soul searching with his wife, Tanya. "It was time to make a decision, as difficult as it might be," Puckett says.

Twins G.M. Andy MacPhail called Puckett and was shocked when Puckett told him that he was seriously weighing offers. That's when MacPhail called Pohlad and told him the chances of retaining Puckett were slipping away.

"Two days later, all of us, Kirby, Tanya, Andy MacPhail, my assistant Mike Maas, had dinner at Carl Pohlad's house," Shapiro says. "And for the first time, I think everyone realized the feelings Kirby had for the Twins. By that time, the papers were talking about him leaving and the pressure was beginning to really get tough. That's when the Twins made a \$30-million offer."

Shapiro later laid out the options to Puckett. "He would likely have been guaranteed anywhere from \$35 million to 37 million somewhere else," Shapiro says.

But by then, Puckett knew the decision he would make. "Hey, I knew some guys would likely get more than me, but we had a chance to get \$30 million and stay where I wanted to be," Puckett says. "All of a sudden, it became an easy decision."

Shapiro came away from the process with even more respect for Puckett. "When a player of his magnitude enters the free-agent market, there is a lot of pride on the line," Shapiro says. "There's a lot of 'if he gets 40 (million) and I get 30 then he's getting a higher score' kind of thing."

"But I believe that my job involves not just working with dollars, but also working with values. And in Kirby's case, I feel lucky he was doing the same thing. You always want to get the best possible situation for your client, but sometimes your client is just looking at the money."

Even though Puckett is back in Minnesota, the Phillies' Thomas came away impressed by how Puckett handled himself.

"We've been in free-agent things over the last few years when we've come away feeling used, feeling as if we were included in the talks only to jack up the price," Thomas says.

"However, our dealings with Kirby Puckett were very different. We felt flattered that he wanted to talk to us and I came away with the feeling that while he was genuinely torn about the possibility of leaving Minnesota, if it didn't work out with the Twins, we would have had a shot at signing him. He wanted to go to a place and a community where he felt he could make a difference, and I think we made a good impression.

"But there was never any pressure in the whole thing. There was never a time when he asked us what our price would be, never any hint that we were bidding against someone else. It was obvious to me his first choice was staying put. But it also was obvious that this was a guy who wasn't just shopping himself to the highest bidder."

Ripken's negotiating position was in a sense more difficult than Puckett's. He was raised an Oriole, growing up in the Baltimore area and born to a father who was part of the Orioles' organization for nearly 30 years. As Ripken said many times during the process, "I'm an Oriole, it's been part of me since I was born."

Such statements created something of a bargaining disadvantage, especially until Ripken reached the point where he could declare free agency. Though Ripken never wanted to leave Baltimore, he also wanted the Orioles to treat him fairly according to prevailing market conditions.

"I had to make my contract decision based on what was best for me and my immediate family," Ripken says. "There was no question that I wanted to stay in Baltimore, but I had to look at it as a business decision as well."

Although Ripken won't acknowledge it, those close to him say the time it took to complete his negotiations (Shapiro says the talks stretched over 333 days) took its toll on Ripken, who last season had the worst year of his career. Throughout the talks, Ripken steadfastly refused to comment on the negotiations and was stung when there were published reports on the talks that appeared to be leaks from the club's side.

"Cal's goal was to remain in Baltimore at a fair price," Shapiro says. "And he never made a public statement about going elsewhere. Those factors likely made the club feel it had a special advantage because until he reached the point where he had to decide to file for free agency, no one felt he would go somewhere else."

Baltimore's rather tortured dealings with Ripken finally ended in him re-signing last August. But in the months following Ripken's eventual signing, the Orioles fired his father, Cal Sr., his third-base coach and did not offer a contract to his brother, Billy.

Ripken says he refuses to believe the club dealt with him cynically by making sure he was under contract before canning his father and brother. "If that's exactly what happened, if all those things were connected, I'd really be disgusted," Ripken says.

"But there's no way for me to know that. And I refuse to believe that is what happened."

However, the way things turned out for the Family Ripken have somewhat soured Cal's storybook career with the Orioles. And while Ripken is the consummate professional on the field, he admits it is difficult to put the past totally behind him.

"You know, you dream of being a pro ballplayer and you make it," he says. "Your dad is a coach and you know the odds are against your ending up on the same team. Then your brother comes up and the odds are against him making the major leagues. And I felt we beat all those odds."

"It was all kind of nice because baseball had always been something that separated us as a family because my dad was away so much when I was a kid. Then baseball became something that brought us all back together. My dad was there if I needed him, and so was my brother. The whole experience certainly remains a positive, but there's also some hurt that goes with it."

However, Ripken remains an Oriole for life just as Puckett likely will end his career in Minnesota. In an age when tradition is often measured in annual increments, two of baseball's true stars chose the comforts of home over the glitzy free-agent stage.

That such loyalty and such feelings have become so rare perhaps underlines better than anything else what's wrong with modern baseball.

Peter Pascarelli is a contributing writer who covers baseball for THE SPORTING NEWS.

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