

Mike Schmidt and Scott Rolen should be talkin' baseball

BY JAYSON STARK

The Best Third Baseman Philadelphia Has Ever Seen is gyrating out of his chair at Kevin's New York Deli in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. He is doing his impression of the first play he ever witnessed by the Best Young Third Baseman Philadelphia Has Seen Since Him.

"He made that play," Mike Schmidt says of **Scott Rolen**, "very much like I would have made it. He made a real tough play look real easy."

The play in question came on a bolt down the line by the Dodgers' Brett Butler. Rolen made this play in Los Angeles. Schmidt, rapt TV viewer at the time, is now making the play all over again at the deli.

Wham. The imaginary baseball is heading toward the deli window. Oomph. Schmidt is lunging off his seat, glove hand reaching for the floor, chair legs tilting toward the door. Grab. Plant. Fire (toward the cash register). Out!

"A great play," Schmidt says. "A great natural play. A play that really showed his natural talent. It's the only play I've ever seen him make."

The only play he has seen him make? Schmidt said that matter-of-factly, not intending to be controversial or dramatic. But the more you think about it, the odder it gets.

How could this be? How could the paths of these two men never have crossed?

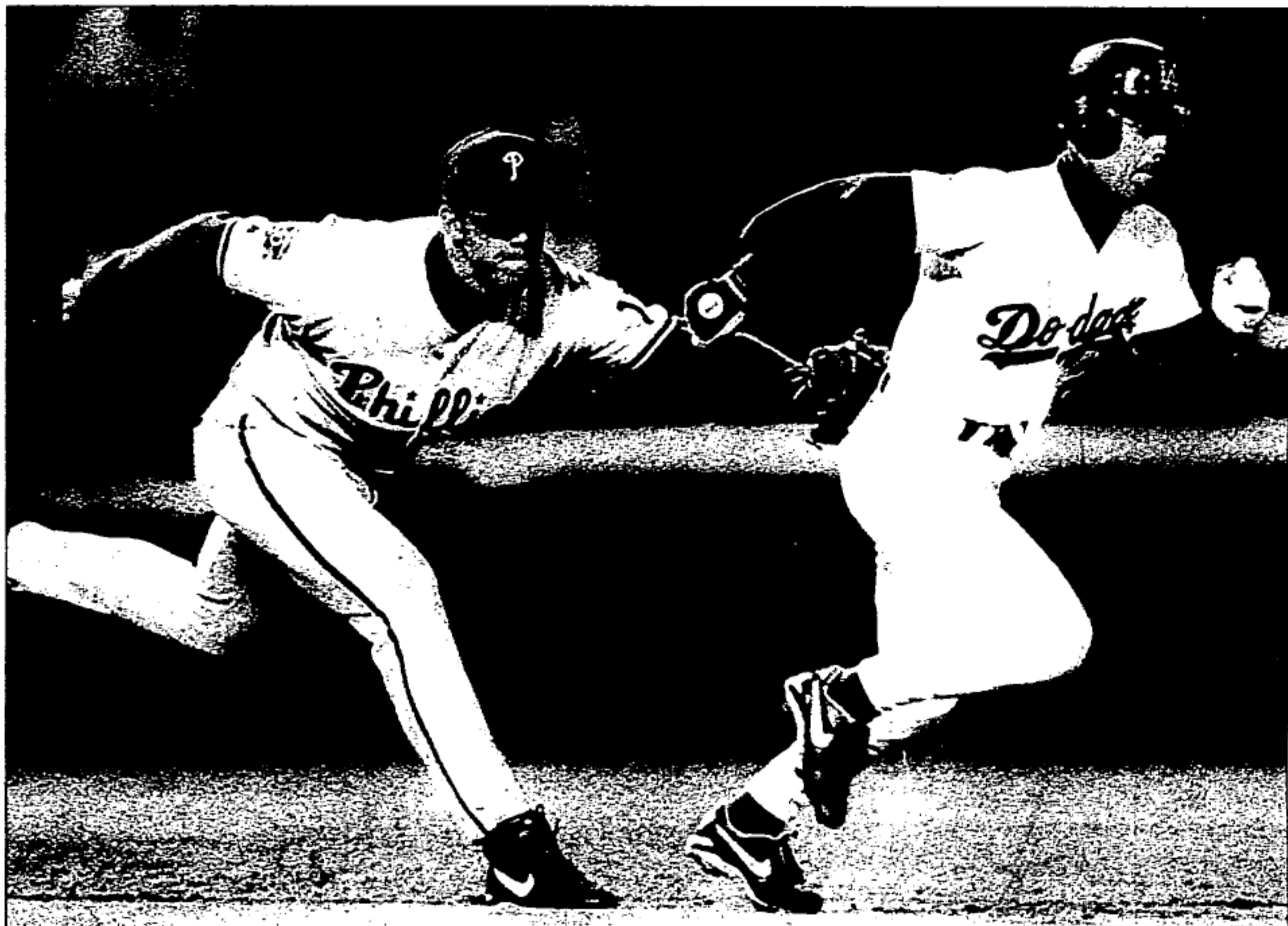
True, Mike Schmidt has been a former Phillie for nearly eight years. True, **Scott Rolen** has been in the Phillies' organization for a little more than four seasons and had played in only 37 games entering the 1997 season. True, Schmidt is now a Floridian. True, Rolen is a young man from Jasper, Ind.

"How do I say this without getting into a long thing about the Phillies and Mike Schmidt again?" Schmidt wonders aloud. "I'm really not looking to start any controversy ... about me and the Phillies. But ..."

But the question has been asked. So Schmidt answers it.

"I guess this is just in keeping with the history of the Phillies and Mike Schmidt," he says. "I mean, why would they, out of the clear blue sky, call me and say, 'Hey, Mike, we'd like you to come down and spend some time with **Scott Rolen** at spring training? Nobody ever asked. But I'd gladly have done that."

That is not necessarily how the Phillies



Gotcha! Rolen, who got Schmidt's attention on an earlier play against Brett Butler (foiled again here), could use a rundown on the game's finer points.

remember it. General manager Lee Thomas says he wrote Schmidt a letter inviting him to spring training two years ago and Schmidt declined, saying the Phillies were just trying to use his name.

But Schmidt's recall is that the last time they spoke, Thomas said: "Just call us if you want to come to spring training."

"That's the way it's been put to me," Schmidt says. "Now I'm sure if I ever wanted to go to the Phillies' spring training, I'd be welcome by a lot of people."

"But I would like to think, if they felt a need, they would call me and say, 'Mike, we'd like you to come to spring training. We've got this kid and that kid and this kid and that kid—and **Scott Rolen**. Give us two weeks. Help us out a little. Spend some time with these guys."

"If they ever did that, I'd be on the next plane."

Thomas' reply is: "I did that. I asked if he wanted to come, that we'd like to have him in spring training to be around the guys, work with anyone he wanted to work with."

"I wrote him and (Steve) Carlton. Lefty said yes. Schmitt said no. He said one reason he didn't want to was that he's trying to get on that (senior) golf tour, and that was taking a lot of his time."

Schmidt concedes that he has a busy life. He has his boat business. He helps coach his son's high school baseball team. And he really is gearing up to try to qualify for the Senior PGA Tour when he turns 50—in 1999—by playing in 30 golf tournaments this year.

"So it's not like I'm sitting home, waiting

for the phone to ring," he says. "But I'll tell you. If the phone did ring and somebody said, 'Mike, we'd like to hire you for a couple of weeks,' I'd sure as hell make myself available."

Schmidt sees what the Reds have done recently for Johnny Bench—they overlooked Bench's past criticism of the organization and hired him to a big-title, low-responsibility position with the club. His duties are unstructured. His job is crafted around his personal schedule. His presence is mostly as a symbol, a link between past and present.

But even without such a permanent gig, wouldn't there at least be some benefit for Schmidt and Rolen to have a conversation about life, about third base, about baseball, about Philadelphia?

"Probably, the sense the Phillies have

Whether it's Schmidt or the Phillies at fault, the master third baseman should be imparting his knowledge to the rookie

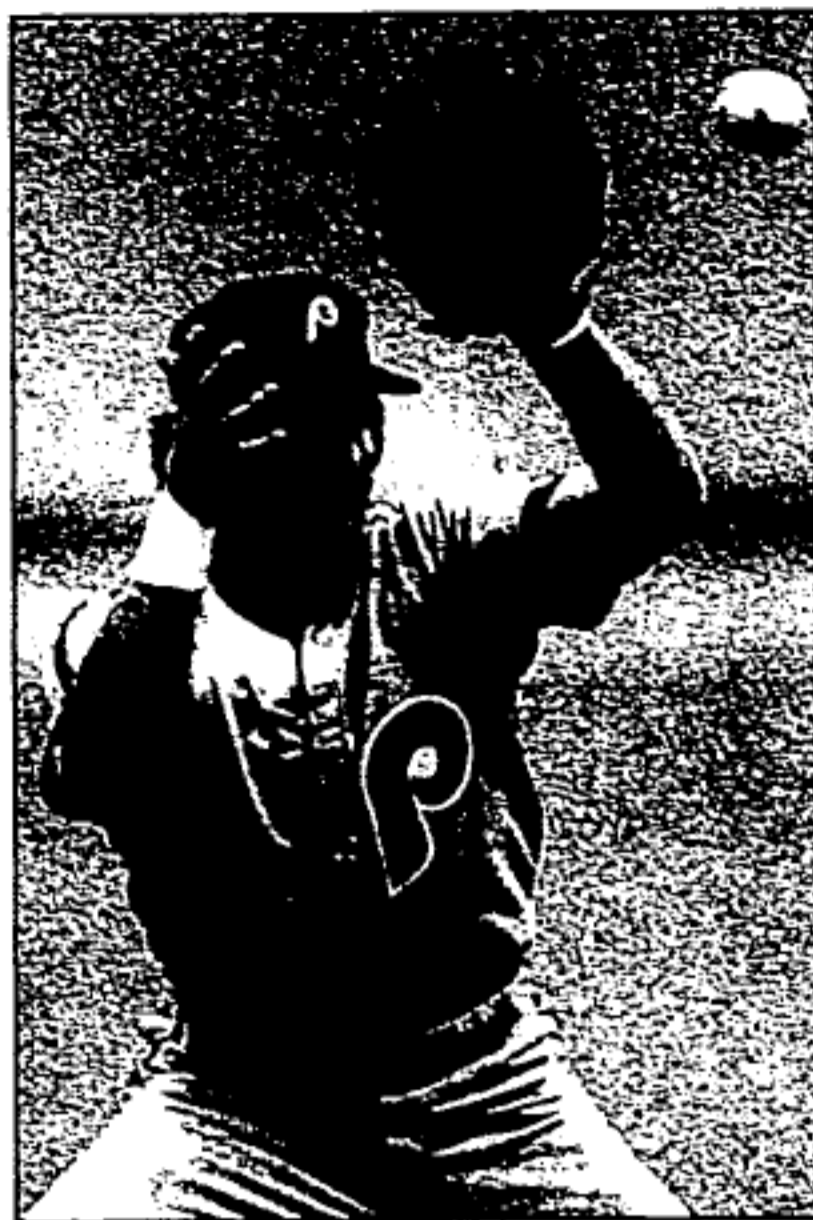
about me is that I may confuse him," Schmidt says. "You know, I'm an analytical guy, and I had my own way of doing things. And they're worried I'd be liable to get the kid to try to hit like me, and they might lose him altogether."

Thomas discounts that, too, saying: "Knowing Scott Rolen, I don't think it would change Scott. Scott has a pretty good head on his shoulders."

Whatever happens down the road, the bottom line is this: Scott Rolen, only 22, would surely enjoy picking Hall of Famer Mike Schmidt's brain. And if he ever got the chance, here is some of what Schmidt would tell him:

■ On wondering whether he's ready for the big leagues: "I guarantee you Scott Rolen's a much better hitter than I was at that stage. ... I probably wasn't ready for the big leagues (at age 23, Schmidt hit .196 for the Phils). ... Like a lot of kids, I had no confidence. I wasn't sure I belonged. Then I got there on that team with (Larry) Bowa and (Willie) Montanez and (Greg) Luzinski. And I didn't get along real well with those guys early in my career."

"There was a lot of jealousy, a lot of ribbing. And it made it tough on me. It really wasn't until Dave Cash came to the Phillies that I turned it around. So if I compare my situation to Scott Rolen's, I would say it would be a big help for a guy like him to have an experienced player as a friend."



Bad connection: Schmidt and the Phils debate a call—or lack of one—to help young players.

■ On how long it takes to feel comfortable: "If he just has one good year, that's all it takes. Just to have that good, 160-game year under your belt, grinding out those 600 at-bats over a full year, suffering through the 0-for-10s and 0-for-15s ... gives you a solid understanding that there's no hurry."

"Once you have that one good year and see all you can accomplish if you stay healthy for

160 games, if you get those 600 at-bats, you know you're going to get your hits. You know you're going to get your home runs. You know what you can accomplish. You don't have to have a great April. You don't need to put that pressure on yourself."

"This will come to Scott once he gets comfortable with life as an everyday player. Then he'll find this is a wonderful, wonderful way to make a living. You wonder if little things like that have ever been communicated to a player like Scott."

■ On dealing with Phillies fans: "It's hard for me to say, because I don't sense that the Philadelphia fans will perceive him in the same light that they perceived me. I doubt if Scott, as easygoing as he might be, will project the image to the fans that I did. He probably projects a little softer image ... an image a little more likable. Maybe the people of Philadelphia will take to him more than they took to me."

"The other thing is that he's probably more of a contact hitter than I was. So there'll be more of a flow for him with the fans. It won't be as drastic, one way or the other, as it was with me. I mean, there's nothing like the strikeout to get people to turn on you—and nothing like the home run to get them to cheer for you."

■ On the comparisons: "It probably would have been tough for me when I came along, as sensitive as I was, if there had been a third baseman of my stature who had played before me. With all the people I was trying to play for other than myself and my team, I probably would have gone nuts."

"I wanted to stop the booing. And I wanted to prove to Bowa and Luzinski that I belonged. And I wanted to prove to (manager Danny) Ozark that I belonged in the lineup. And I wanted to make money. I wanted to be a major-leaguer. If you added: 'I wanted to hit as many home runs as so-and-so,' I probably would have gone nuts because they sure would have reminded me of it, Bowa and those guys."

So how would he advise Rolen?

"If he compares his first year to my first (full) year (the below-.200 effort in 1973), that's all he's got to do. He can just say, 'Let's see where Mike was at this stage of his first year.' And I guarantee he's ahead of me."

So, for now, this is the way it will be. Scott Rolen will do his rookie thing (a week after making the play that impressed Schmidt, he delivered a game-winning hit against the Giants). In another part of the country, another Phillies third baseman of some repute will be the most fascinated observer around.

"I'll be watching Scott Rolen this year," Mike Schmidt says. "I'll be looking at the box score every morning."

Then there is a long pause, as Schmidt thinks about this. Finally, he has one thing to add:

"And if I'm ever at a game," says The Best Third Baseman Philadelphia Has Ever Seen, "I'll go introduce myself."

Jayson Stark covers baseball for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

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