BASEBALL WEEK 9 MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Meet Gary Sheffield again for the first time

The controversial question mark in Milwaukee has become the revitalized answer at third base in San Diego

By JOEL BIERIG and BRUCE LEVINE

Two years after emotional burnout threatened his career, Gary Sheffield is burning up the National League. In Sheffield's first season with the San Diego Padres, his disposition, once as cold as an April day in Milwaukee, has been as sunny as the Southern California skies. At long last, this prideful former shortstop plays third base without feeling like a third wheel.

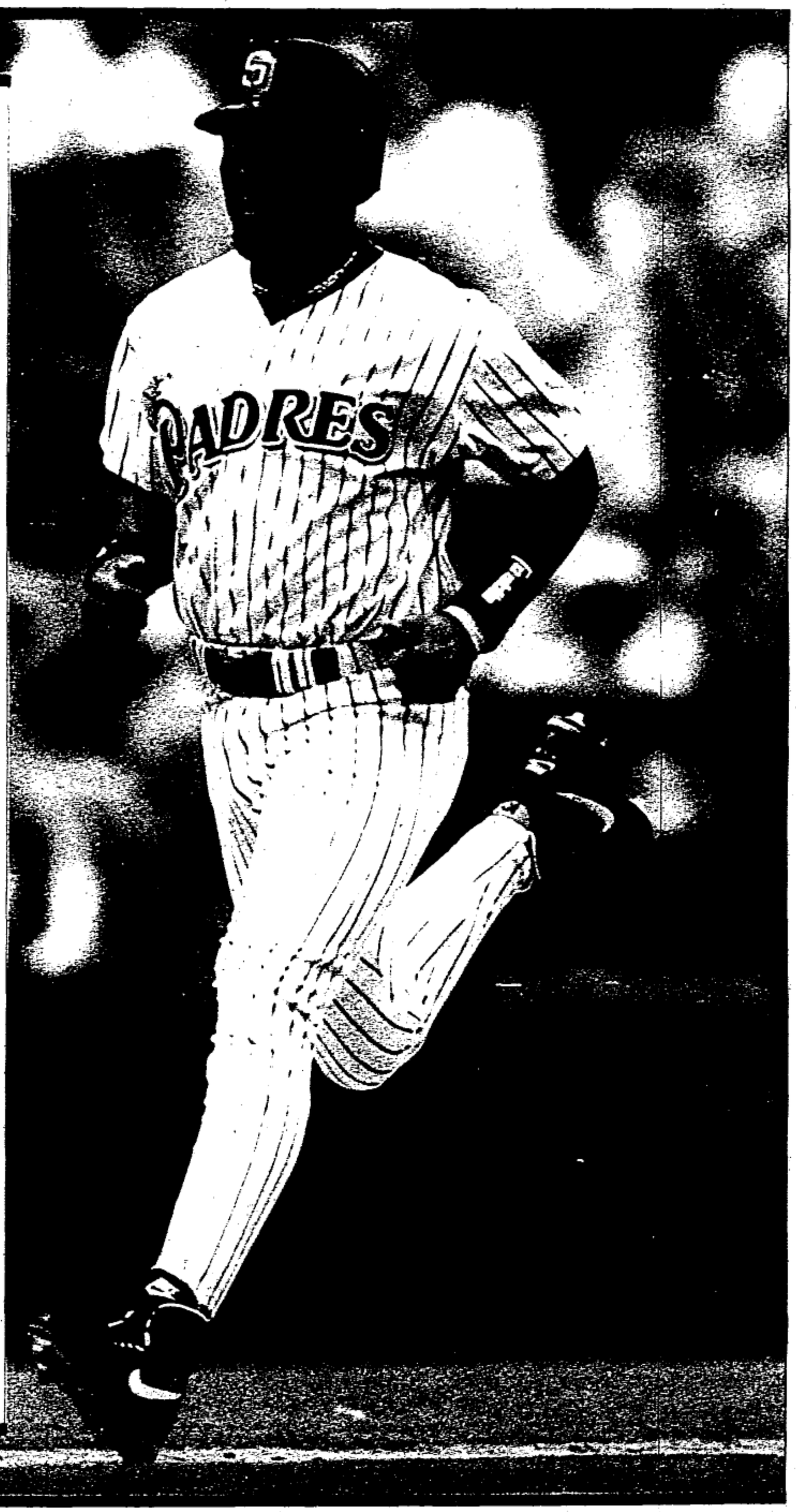
Granted, Sheffield finally seems to have overcome the injuries that plagued him during the parts of four seasons he spent with the Brewers. In this case, however, a healthy outlook has been just as important. At 23, Sheffield is modern proof of an ancient baseball cliche: When a player is young and talented, he can, quite literally, be as good as he wants to be.

Since talking his way out of Milwaukee, where his attitude offended management, teammates and fans, Sheffield has been offensive in all the right ways. Rejuvenated by the March 27 trade that sent him to San Diego, Sheffield has ranked among the N.L. leaders in a number of categories, including batting average (.315), home runs (10) and runs batted in (38). Sheffield also has recorded a career-high 18-game hitting streak, tying him with Kansas City's Gregg Jefferies for the longest in the major leagues this season. In a season that is shaping up as his personal highlights film, Sheffield even hit a single off his uncle, New York Mets righthander Dwight Gooden, in the first major league game they played against each other.

Can the hitting machine who bats third in the Padres' order, sandwiched between Tony Gwynn and Fred McGriff, be the same Gary Sheffield who hit .194 with two homers and 22 RBIs during an injury-filled 1991 season?

"Gary can flat-out play," says McGriff, who, like Sheffield, is from Tampa. "That's all I know about him. And I know that's all he's done since he came here. There's no problem with Gary."

That might surprise a few people in Milwaukee, where even Sheffield's best season was marred by controversy and shrouded by question marks. In 1990, on a club that included Robin Yount, Paul Molitor and Dave Park-



er, Sheffield hit a team-high .294 with 10 homers, 67 RBIs and a team-best 25 stolen bases. But his season ended September 12 because of a mysterious illness that Sheffield now says was emotional exhaustion.

"It was one of those things where I got sick," Sheffield says. "I put all my energy into that season, and it really caught up to me in September. I was out of gas. My mom called me and she was crying, thinking I was on drugs and this and that. I always told her, 'I don't care how bad it gets. You never have to worry about me going to drugs and alcohol.' That's one of the things I'm proud of — that I never went to those things to solve my problems."

A look at Sheffield, cheered in San Diego after being jeered in Milwaukee, reminds baseball people that environment can be crucial to an athlete's development. Even more interestingly, Sheffield is a textbook example of the leverage the modern player holds over management. Sheffield, the sixth player chosen in the 1986 draft, admittedly used his mouth and the media's willing ear to badger the Brewers into trading him.

His final salvo came this spring and included a new target, Brewers President and Chief Executive Officer Bud Selig. Sheffield accused Selig and former manager Tom Trebelhorn of forcing him to play despite wrist and shoulder injuries in 1991. As it was, Sheffield appeared in only 50 games before undergoing shoulder surgery August 23.

He wouldn't have played even that much, he says, if the Brewers hadn't threatened to end talks about a two-year contract. "They told me that even hurt, I was 50 percent better than what they had," Sheffield says.

But his injuries took a toll. During June, Sheffield recorded one hit in 32 at-bats. When he ended his season July 24, he was in an 0-for-17 skid. Over the winter, Sheffield had to settle for a one-year contract instead of the two-year deal he said had been promised. His base pay this season is $450,000, a raise of $50,000, which is paltry by today's inflated standards. He can earn another $250,000 if he plays in 150 games. (He never has appeared in more than 125.)

Sheffield, viewing the contract snub as the last straw in an already deteriorated relationship with the Brewers, arrived in spring training with the goal of using the media to force a trade. "It's the truth," he says. "That's what I did. I had to get out of Milwaukee."

The Brewers sent Sheffield and minor league pitcher Geoff Kellogg to San Diego for righthander Ricky Bones and two minor league players, shortstop Jose Valentin and outfielder Matt Mieske. The Brewers, who say they are pleased with the trade, insist Sheffield was traded on their terms, not his. Regardless, they were wise to rid themselves of a distraction. With Sheffield out of the lineup for the final two months of the 1991 season, the Brewers posted a 40-19 record. "Now I'm over here, and I don't look back anymore," Sheffield says.

But others do. The Sheffield saga affected the careers of Trebelhorn and former Brewers general manager Harry Dalton.

"I feel badly that he didn't have the kind of seasons in Milwaukee, coincidentally when I was there, that were equal to his ability," says Trebelhorn, fired after the 1991 season and now a dugout coach for the Cubs. "Because if he had, I'd probably still be there."

Instead, Phil Garner is the Brewers' manager and Sal Bando has replaced Dalton, who is serving out his contract under the title of senior vice president. In the spring of 1991, Sheffield accused Dalton of ruining the team. In retrospect, Sheffield says he had no major gripes with anyone except Dalton.

"Me and Harry Dalton that didn't hit it off real well," Sheffield says. "I felt that if a player is out to do his job, he shouldn't have to go into the office and be seeing the general manager before every game. All it is is a distraction. I felt that every little thing I did always was (treated as) a big issue."

"Gary Sheffield is a subject that I don't care to get involved in," Dalton said from a Milwaukee hospital, where he was in traction for a disk problem in his back. "According to what the papers said here, Gary said that Bud Selig back-stabbed him. I don't want to get involved with that. I'm not the general manager anymore."

Baseball throws a surprise party

It might not surprise some experts that the Baltimore Orioles were tied with the talented Toronto Blue Jays in the American League East through last Sunday. But the sight of Orioles outfielder Brady Anderson among the league leaders in a number of offensive categories, including RBIs, surprises even Anderson.

In a season that has been full of unexpected twists (not to mention sprains and fractures), none has been more surprising than Anderson's remarkable production. Other players who have joined the surprise party include San Diego third baseman Gary Sheffield, Oakland infielder Mike Bordick, Philadelphia first baseman John Kruk and catcher Darren Daulton and St. Louis righthander Bob Tewksbury.

This shaped up as a make or break season for Anderson, who had never realized the promise he showed years ago as a prospect in the Boston organization. But Orioles Manager Johnny Oates has long been a supporter of Anderson. And when Anderson played relatively well late last season, Oates made up his mind to give Anderson an opportunity as the everyday leadoff hitter.

"He never got a chance to show what he could do for an extended period of time," Oates says. "Because of his speed, I just felt that he was an asset we needed to give every chance of succeeding."

Anderson set a career high for RBIs by Memorial Day and was among the league leaders in that category despite his status as a leadoff hitter. He also led the league in triples and has stayed near the top in on-base percentage. Anderson, whose career average was .219 entering the season, was hitting .287 with 10 homers, 39 RBIs and 17 stolen bases through last Sunday. Through it all, Anderson, 28, has kept things in perspective.

"I know that I'm not likely to keep up this pace for the whole season, that there will be times when I struggle," he said. "The one thing I've done this year is try not to put any pressure on myself. I decided right from the start that it was time to stop worrying and pressing and listening to everyone and just go out and play the way I feel best."

The Orioles feature other major surprises. Catcher Chris Hoiles has blossomed into a bona fide power threat and a solid everyday player. And, in the process, he is paying dividends on a 1988 trade in which he was acquired from Detroit for since-retired Fred Lynn.

And then there is Baltimore righthander Rick Sutcliffe, who was spurned by Cubs General Manager Larry Himes and was signed by the Orioles as a free agent. Himes and others thought Sutcliffe was through, but he has proven them wrong by posting an 8-4 record through last Sunday.

The out-of-nowhere award goes to Bordick, who was second in the American League with a .333 average through Sunday. Bordick, the pride of Maine, had a career average of .229 entering the season.

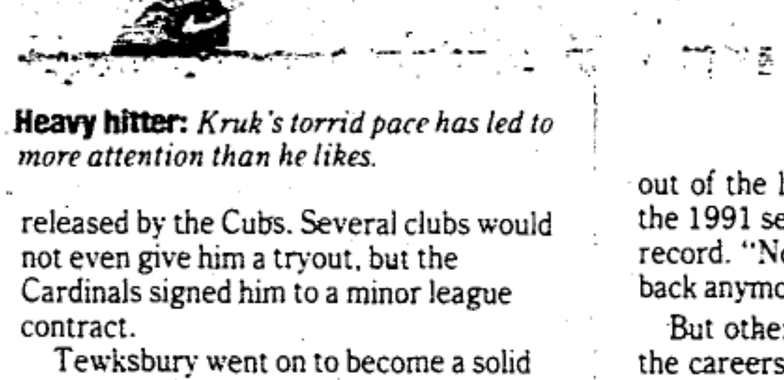
The Phillies also feature big surprises. Kruk is a career .290 hitter, so no one should be shocked that he is hitting well. But no one could expect him to be leading the major leagues with a .376 average.

Not surprisingly, the earthy Kruk downplays the hoopla surrounding his start. "But if you want to know the truth," he said, "I sort of wish that Tony Gwynn would get hot and catch me, so I could stop getting asked so many questions."

Perhaps even more stunning was Daulton's remarkable production. After hitting .196 in an injury-troubled '91 season, Daulton has emerged among the leaders in average and RBIs.

"I guess I'm ruining the seasons of a lot of people who didn't think I'd do well this year," Daulton said. "I always felt I could be where I am right now."

Among National League pitchers, Tewksbury has emerged as the season's biggest surprise. Tewksbury was unemployed four years ago after being released by the Cubs. Several clubs would not even give him a tryout, but the Cardinals signed him to a minor league contract.



Heavy hitter: *Kruk's torrid pace has led to more attention than he likes.*

Tewksbury went on to become a solid pitcher for the Cardinals, winning 21 games in 1990-91. But he has ascended to prominence this season. Tewksbury (6-1) was second in the National League with a 2.09 ERA through last Sunday and had walked only seven in his first 82 innings.

"He should serve as an example to young pitchers everywhere that you can become successful if you stick with it and learn how to throw strikes," Cardinals Manager Joe Torre said.

Right behind Tewksbury in the N.L. ERA chart is the Giants' Swift, acquired from Seattle in the big Kevin Mitchell trade. Swift was placed in a regular starting role for the first time and reeled off six consecutive victories to begin the season.

However, Swift was placed on the disabled list with a sore shoulder May 23. That did not come as a surprise to some experts, who had predicted he would not be able to endure the number of innings required of a starting pitcher. Swift is not expected to return until later this month.

"It may be just fatigue from being overworked a little," Swift said. "Maybe it was coming out and pitching the way I did . . . three complete games right away. Maybe it was too much work too fast." ◆

—PETER PASCARELLI

Control freak: *Tewksbury is a model for young pitchers because he won't beat himself.*

BASEBALL
MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Sheffield's new teammates in San Diego find it hard to believe he is the same player who:

■ Called the Brewers' pitching staff "girls" for not protecting him when opposing pitchers knocked him down as a rookie in 1989. During that season, he also blasted the team and organization for what he considered general mistreatment.

■ Never accepted the club's decision to move him from shortstop to third base at the end of the 1989 season.

■ Was fined $1,000 by Trebelhorn for failing to run wind sprints after a spring-training game in 1991.

■ Was booed in Milwaukee on Opening Day 1991.

■ Charged that Selig back-stabbed him when the owner invited Sheffield's parents to Milwaukee last season in the hope of improving relations with the player.

Sheffield once hid in the bullpen at the start of a game because Trebelhorn left him out of the lineup after a 3-for-4 performance the previous day. Sheffield was coming back from an injury, and Trebelhorn had told him before the series he would not use him in the second game. Nevertheless, sources say Sheffield fumed that he wasn't playing. After being discovered in the bullpen and being told by Trebelhorn to report to the dugout or "go home," Sheffield reportedly replied: "I'm not going to cheer or anything on the bench."

Trebelhorn declined to comment on the incident but says: "Hard as it is for people to believe, Gary and I got along very well. I guess at one point, he felt I worked him too hard. If that's the worst thing I ever did, worked him too hard to make him a better player, I feel pretty good about that."

The Padres' Gwynn says: "When Gary got over here, the only thing I said to him was, 'What you did there, you did there. What you do here is all I care about.' I'm sure Gary was like a lot of young guys I played with in rookie ball after I was drafted. Remember, I was 21, had spent four years at San Diego State and had a pretty good idea of what I was going to be doing. But these 18-year-old kids I was playing with didn't have a clue. Gary probably would fit into that category, having been drafted at 17 and not really having matured to the point he's at now. And looking at it realistically, he's still only 23."

'MY ONLY GOALS ARE TO CONTINUE TO HAVE FUN, PLAY GOOD BASEBALL AND, OH YEAH, TO HIT THE GAME-WINNING HOME RUN OFF DWIGHT (GOODEN) IN THE SEVENTH GAME OF THE PLAYOFFS.'

—Gary Sheffield

Montreal General Manager Dan Duquette, who was the Brewers' scouting director when Sheffield was drafted, says, "Purely from a scouting perspective, we knew Gary could hit, hit with power, run, throw, field his position. We didn't think maturity was going to be any more of a problem with Gary than with any other 18-year-old kid. But then we drafted Bill Spiers (in 1987), and they eventually moved Gary from shortstop to third base. Gary felt like he had to be the shortstop in our organization. He didn't take to moving to third base very well."

In San Diego, Sheffield is content to play third base next to Tony Fernandez, a four-time winner of the Rawlings Gold Glove Award. And why not? The Padres' second baseman, Kurt Stillwell, also is a former everyday shortstop.

If Sheffield has been embraced more warmly in San Diego, there are reasons, apart from his hot start. In Milwaukee, he was billed as a savior. Brewers fans had been spoiled by quick-blossoming stars such as Yount and Molitor, who were 18 and 21, respectively, when they emerged with the team. The fans became impatient with the injuries that were so many banana peels on Sheffield's path to greatness. Sheffield grew frustrated, too.

"When I didn't win Rookie of the Year, they started writing me off," Sheffield says of 1989, when he missed two months because of a broken foot. He finished that season with a .247 average, five homers and 32 RBIs.

Padres fans, a more mellow lot, are happy just to see a competent player at third base. Third base has been a perennial trouble spot for San Diego, which has used 73 third basemen in its 24-year history. Sheffield became the team's seventh Opening Day third baseman in as many seasons.

"Tony, Fred and just about everybody told me, 'You don't have to come over and hit .350 and be MVP or anything. We needed a third baseman, and we got one. We're glad to have you,' " Sheffield said. "If I go out there every day and am on the field for 150 or 155 games, I feel I'll be helping this ballclub in a big way."

Sheffield seems to have come a long way since the emotional trauma that ended his 1990 season.

"Nobody knows this, but when I was in the hospital, I cried to my mother on the telephone," he says. "It was probably the lowest point of my career. I feel like a totally different person now. I'm relaxed and feel wanted.

"My only goals are to continue to have fun, play good baseball and, oh yeah, to hit the game-winning home run off Dwight in the seventh game of the playoffs."

Sheffield and the people around him can only hope that this time the dreams won't turn into nightmares. ◆

Joel Bierig and Bruce Levine are free-lance writers from Chicago.

BASEBALL REPORT

Sheffield is baseball's most tormented player

Bob
NIGHTENGALE

Marlins outfielder Gary Sheffield sits back in his locker, viewing life from smoldering eyes, wondering why baseball doesn't have more important things to worry about than him.

Sheffield is one of the most talented players in the game. He has the greatest bat speed of any player, and he has the talent to be as big a star as Ken Griffey Jr., Barry Bonds or Frank Thomas. He could be as powerful in south Florida as Wayne Huizenga.

Sheffield also has a brilliant baseball mind. He could out-manage half the men in this game on strategy alone. He can call game situations well before they happen.

But instead of being a hero, instead of being considered a manager-in-waiting, Sheffield has the Marlins and the rest of baseball worried about his safety.

"I don't understand it," Sheffield says. "You reach the top, and people try to bring you down. There's nothing wrong with me. People keep trying to find stuff, but they haven't found a damn thing. If you listen to people, they think I'm a criminal or something.

"I just want to play baseball, but it's hard, man, with people coming after you. I just want to be left alone."

Yet trouble has haunted Sheffield the past six months, reaching such an extreme that Major League Baseball Security — brought into investigate his troubles — had him checked by psychologists.

In that time, there has been a murder-for-hire plot against his mother, allegations that he left threatening notes for his son's mother, a stalking by a fan and harassment by anonymous callers. Sheffield has had his car and house broken into. He was pulled off a team flight while Broward County (Fla.) sheriff's deputies, acting on an anonymous tip, searched his carry-on bag for drugs. There have been fliers circulating around Joe Robbie Stadium saying he has the AIDS virus. He has had an aggravated battery complaint filed against him. And he has been shot in the shoulder.

"I don't enjoy my fame," Sheffield says. "I love doing this for a living, but there's a burden. People don't understand I'm really not allowed to be normal anymore. They took normal away from me.

"I never pictured baseball being this way."

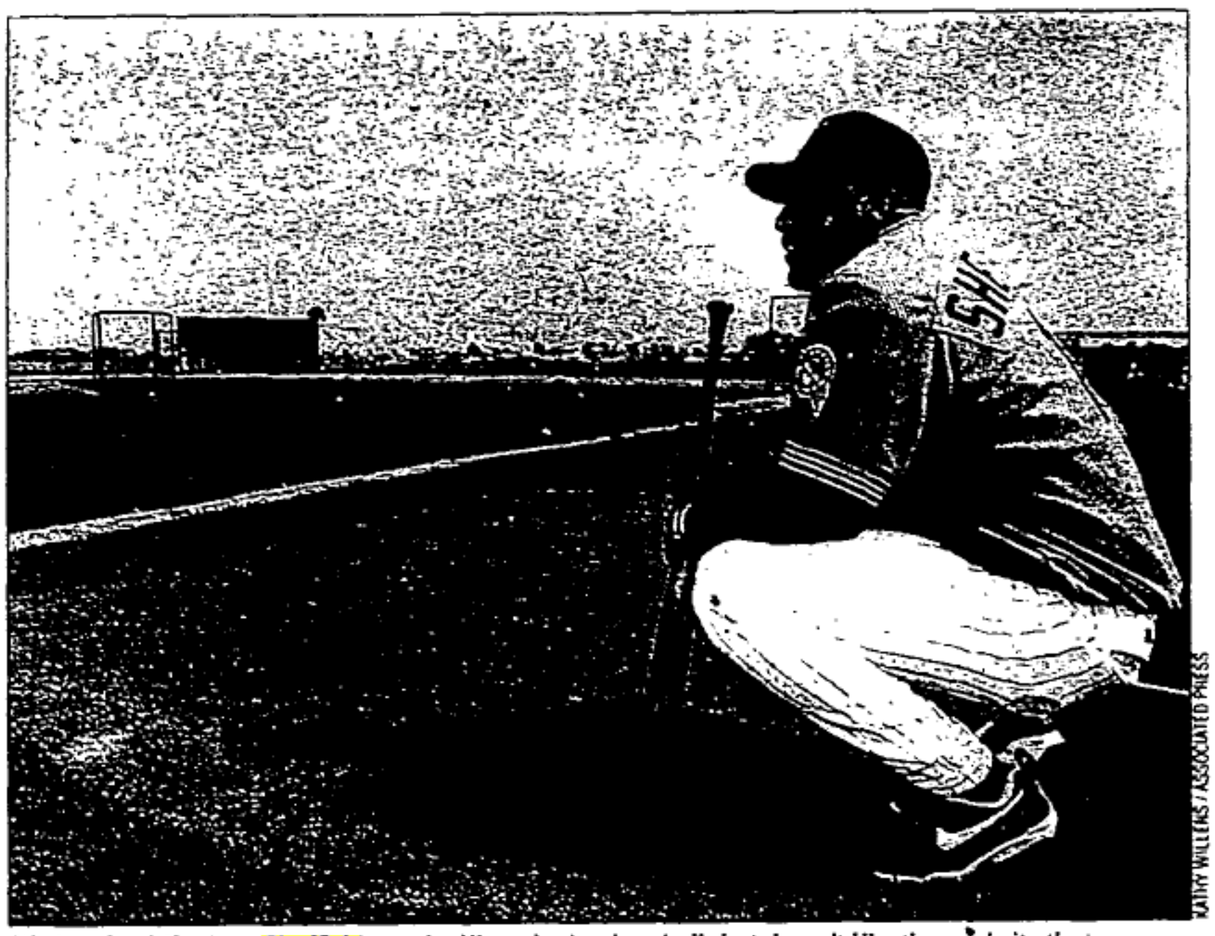
This is a man who never got a chance to be a kid. He was a father at 17, a major leaguer at 19 and a multimillionaire before 25.

"There were a lot of things I wasn't ready for," Sheffield says, "but it seems like people keep attacking me with all of these accusations. Look, I've been around for eight years now. I've been tested for everything — AIDS, cocaine, everything. They can't find one.

"I've taken out three life insurance policies and got tested again. Everything always comes back, 'Your system is good.'

"People can say what they want, but nobody has proof. I'll show them on paper that Gary doesn't do drugs, he doesn't do anything that is illegal to his body."

The primary source of Sheffield's woes, his friends tell him, is his hometown area of Tampa-St. Petersburg. This is where all the troubles and innuendo start. He needs to get as far away from his neighborhood as possible. Some say he should leave the state of Florida.



KATHY WILLENS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's lonely at the top: *Sheffield says he likes playing baseball, but doesn't like the celebrity that comes with it. But until he deals with that aspect of the game, he won't live up to his potential.*

"I'm still amazed at things that happen to him," teammate Andre Dawson says. "I wonder sometimes, wonder how much is fabricated and how much is truth."

Sheffield, who came close to winning the National League's triple crown in 1992 for the Padres (.330 batting average, 33 homers, 100 RBIs), remains stubborn. He not only is staying in St. Petersburg, but he also is building a $2.6-million home on the bayfront, surrounded by a six-foot concrete wall with surveillance. He also has his own bodyguard.

Yet perhaps the best thing Sheffield did for himself this winter was hire a publicist, Marvet Britto, a former flight attendant who has a public relations agency in New York.

Brito is the one who arranged for Sheffield to appear on a billboard for Mizuno on the interstate leading to the ballpark. She's the one who prodded Sheffield into starting a charity, the Gary Sheffield Foundation. She's the one who arranged an Armani fashion shoot in New York and has plans to put Sheffield on the cover of GQ. She's the one who has Sheffield taking lessons in public speaking from a University of Miami instructor.

Most important, she's the one who insisted Sheffield put distance between himself and the women whom Britto calls "fatals." Sheffield, at her urging, has moved into a fashionable, tri-level apartment in a downtown Miami high-rise, where access is closely guarded.

Even if you somehow sneak by the doorman, you still have to deal with Vance Lovelace, the former Angels and Mariners pitcher who is Sheffield's bodyguard.

"I'm not trying to go out and change my image because that's what people want me to do," Sheffield says. "I do things that I want to do, because they're the right things to do. Helping kids to stay in school, that's important to me.

"You can never say (your mistakes) are over, but you can learn from them. If trouble comes, I have to deal with it. I'm not going to change because people want me to change. I'm going to be Gary.

"Today, I am more at peace with myself."

This season could prove to be Sheffield's coming-out party if he can establish himself again as one of the greatest players in the game.

The talent, of course, always has been there.

Be quiet: *Baylor has heard enough about the Dodgers*

On the board

Rockies Manager Don Baylor says he already is sick of hearing about the Dodgers this season and will use their words as bulletin-board material. "They don't intimidate me or the club," Baylor says. "They might irritate, but they don't intimidate. I told our players there are certain things that feed you and motivate you. That's one of them. They can talk a great game, but you have to win on the field. We're not going to be distracted by idle threats when we go on the field."

Wake-up call

National League umpire Eric Gregg, suspended two years ago for being overweight, says John McSherry's death provided a wake-up call. "My wife called me three times last night and said, 'You'd better slow down on the road.' This is a hell of a warning sign. I've got to slow down. After what happened, I'm scared to eat anything. I'm scared to drink anything. I'm going to exercise like those other guys. I'm going to go out and start walking."

Bush league

Greg Vaughn of the Brewers after being hit with a pitch thrown by Angels reliever Mark Holzemer, causing the benches to empty: "He's lucky I didn't snap. I grew up in the 'hood, with drive-bys and knife fights. He better have something in his pocket if he's going to pick a fight with me." Cute, real cute.

Middle relief

How much trouble have the Rangers had with their middle infield? Kevin Elster became their seventh Opening Day shortstop in the past eight years, and the 17th in the club's 25-year history. Mark McLemore was their sixth Opening Day second baseman in six years.

Quick quips

From former outfielder Andy Van Slyke, on the Phillies' pitching staff this season: "It's going to be the rockets' red glare. They're a very patriotic team. It's not by accident they're in Philadelphia."

From White Sox reliever Joe Magrane, after winning his first game since June 5, 1994: "Yeah, I'm pretty good on 670 days of rest. Even halfway through the camp, I had one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel."

Around the bases

The Giants were being ridiculed for starting Cuban pitcher Osvaldo Fernandez in Miami in his first big-league start. Turns out he did just fine. The Dodgers, if you remember, started Hideo Nomo in San Francisco with its large Japanese community, and he certainly had no psychological trauma. ... Phillies President Bill Giles, criticized by the Rockies for postponing Opening Day before the scheduled game because of a forecast of rain, couldn't help but smile when rain began falling one hour before the first pitch would have been thrown. "It's the first time in my life I've ever been happy to see it rain at the ballpark," Giles says. "It was a relief." ... Luis Gonzalez was the Cubs' 10th Opening Day starter in left field in 10 seasons. ... By winning their first two games, the Pirates went over .500 for the first time since May 13, 1994. ... The Phillies' starting rotation that opened the season won a total of 15 games last season. ... The Angels realize more by the day that they made a mistake not re-signing lefty Bob Patterson, who's now with the Cubs. ... Look for the Indians to shop prize prospect Paul Shuey. Considering the shortage of relievers in the major leagues, the Indians could find a lot of takers. ... You know the baseball season is underway when Boston fans are calling for the manager's firing. Kevin Kennedy is on the hot seat, and complaining about his contract last winter didn't sit well with General Manager Dan Duquette. ... God bless you, John McSherry. ◆

Bob Nightengale covers the Dodgers for the Los Angeles Times.

BASEBALL
MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

ON DECK

A capsule look at Week 20 and a peek at what's coming

A triple threat

If you look ahead — as we often do — you will notice on your trusty San Diego Padres schedule, a four-game series October 2-4 in Atlanta to complete the regular season. If you think ahead — as we often do — you might wonder if that final series of 1992 might not have Triple Crown ramifications.

Padres third baseman Gary Sheffield had the look of a Triple Crown winner when he vaulted into a share of the National League lead in home runs and RBIs with two home runs in last Saturday's 4-2 victory over the New York Mets. Sheffield already led the league in hitting.

"It would be a thrill to win it," Sheffield said. "But right now I just want to concentrate on working hard."

At week's end, Sheffield led the N.L. with a .339 average. He was tied with teammate Fred McGriff for the league lead in home runs with 27. Sheffield shared the RBI lead with Philadelphia's Darren Daulton. Both had 87.

If Sheffield, 23, wins the Triple Crown, he will become the second-youngest player to accomplish the feat. Only Ty Cobb was younger when he won the Triple Crown at age 22 in 1909. Moreover, of the 14 players to win the Triple Crown, 12 have gone on to the Hall of Fame.

The last N.L. player to win the Triple Crown was Joe Medwick of the St. Louis Cardinals in 1937. The last to do it in the majors was Boston's Carl Yastrzemski in 1967.

Visions of Triple Crown highlights began dancing in Sheffield's head Saturday when a reporter informed Sheffield that this particular day just happened to be Yastrzemski's 53rd birthday.

Entering the game, Sheffield had been in a 4-for-21 slump, but he told McGriff that he expected to hit a home run.

"I felt comfortable when I started to swing in the batting cage," Sheffield said. "I had been going to right field, but I got my aggressiveness back."

Sheffield

Sheffield homered in the fourth and again in the eighth for his third two-homer game this season.

"He's just so hot right now," said Mets starter Pete Schourek, who gave up the first home run. "I don't know what you can throw him. You could walk him, but they've got plenty of other sticks on the team."

Padres' starter Bruce Hurst, who was the winner in the game, had a similar idea.

"I'd walk him," Hurst said. "But then I'd have to walk Freddie and Darrin Jackson, I guess. Really, Gary has been unbelievable. I'm glad he's on my side."

When we do get down to that final series between the Padres and Braves, Sheffield could be battling for the batting title with teammate Tony Gwynn or Atlanta's Terry Pendleton, and he could be could be fighting it out with McGriff for the league lead in home runs, or with McGriff or Pendleton for the RBI leadership.

Would an Atlanta pitcher walk Sheffield to get to McGriff to deprive Sheffield of the Triple Crown? Even more bizarre, would an Atlanta pitcher walk both Sheffield and McGriff to give Pendleton a shot at leading the N.L. in batting or RBIs?

Stranger things have happened on that last day of the season. ◆

POWER POLL

American League

1. **Oakland.** Healthy Eck all that matters.
2. **Toronto.** Need more than healthy Guzman.
3. **Baltimore.** Holes back, O's ready for run.
4. **Milw.** Garner makes a great manager, huh?
5. **Minnesota.** Back-to-back 1-5 trips hurt.
6. **Chi.** Another second-to-Oakland finish?
7. **Texas.** Ryan's August worse than his start.
8. **Detroit.** Fielder a lock for RBI title.
9. **Cleveland.** Hottest team in East since break.
10. **N.Y.** Pitching staff gets young in a hurry.
11. **K.C.** Macfarlane increasing trade value.
12. **Boston.** Four complete games, 2-2 record.
13. **Calif.** Future is here; Salmon called up.
14. **Sea.** Leary welcomes small media market.

National League

1. **Atlanta.** Justice finding playoff form.
2. **Pitt.** Bonds hits first homer since July.
3. **Mont.** Dibble won't forget Moises Alou.
4. **Cin.** Don't call it a racearound Lou.
5. **S.D.** Myers: 13 straight save conversions.
6. **Chicago.** Over .500 is at least something.
7. **St. Louis.** Tewksbury: 13 wins, 14 walks.
8. **S.F.** Clark hobbles toward another dud finish.
9. **N.Y.** Bonilla should have done this long ago.
10. **Houston.** Five-fan welcoming party.
11. **Phila.** Another .300 season for Nails.
12. **L.A.** Remember when they booed Gross?

THE SPORTING NEWS *Power Poll is determined weekly by votes of baseball correspondents Jeff Blair, Jerry Crasnick, David Cunningham, Joe Giuliotti, John Harper and Peter Schmuck and Senior Editor Mark Newman.*

ASTROS OVER AMERICA

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

THE JOURNEY ENDS

Another week on the road and several Astros might have wound up in the funny farm. Or in the hospital.

That's the way it seemed during the final days of Houston's 28-day, 26-game trip, when the usual clubhouse gags grew just a little more outrageous.

Muscular Pete Incaviglia and his henchmen executed not one, but two "three-man lifts." And on consecutive days, yet.

For the unenlightened, the three-man lift is a stunt that involves a trio of players lying on the floor and winding their arms and legs around their neighbor. This effectively immobilizes the poor fellow in the middle - the predetermined victim.

While the muscleman - in this case, Incaviglia - pretends to limber his muscles for the big hoist, other players lovingly douse the trapped middleman with shaving cream, tobacco juice and other gooey substances.

Center fielder Steve Finley was the initial victim in St. Louis. Utilityman Juan Guerrero happened to be taking extra batting practice at the time, so he was fooled the next day. Guerrero's entrapment was especially embarrassing, because he reportedly was the stooge in a similar plot last year while playing in Double A.

The third and final night in St. Louis brought an old-fashioned, hotfoot. Victim: Coach Bob Cluck, framed by his beloved pitchers.

But nothing could top coach Ed Ott's antics at Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium last Saturday, the trip's penultimate day.

Ott thought it would be a great idea to ride the all-terrain vehicle belonging to the Phillie Phanatic. So Ott mounted the scooter, zipped through short left field, nearly ran over a couple of innocent field attendants and pulled to a dramatic stop in front of the Astros' dugout.

The dramatic turned comic when the vehicle's front brakes locked, flipping Ott and the scooter as spectators roared.

Fortunately, Ott was OK. His only wounds were to his pride. He explained that he was accustomed to riding a similar four-wheeler that had its rear brake on the right handlebar. That's the one he squeezed on the Phanatic's bike, except it happened to be the front brake.

Before the next day's trip finale, the Phanatic presented Ott with a Big Wheel toy trike and a crash helmet, the latter of which bore Ott's last name and his uniform number (14).

That summed up the Astros' 12-14 trip. It could have been hazardous to their record and their psyche, but everybody seemed to emerge smiling. What was the best thing about coming home? "No more club sandwiches," Jeff Bagwell said.

Chris Haft covers the Astros for the Houston Post and filed a dispatch each week during the trip.

The National League leaders through last week:

Batting

Gary Sheffield, Padres	.339
Andy Van Slyke, Pirates	.330
John Kruk, Phillies	.329
Brett Butler, Dodgers	.317
Tony Gwynn, Padres	.314

Runs batted in

Sheffield	87
Darren Daulton, Phillies	87
Terry Pendleton, Braves	79
Fred McGriff, Padres	78
Jeff Bagwell, Astros	72

Home runs

Sheffield	27
McGriff	27
Daulton	22
Barry Bonds, Pirates	21
Dave Hollins, Phillies	18

This time, Gant can't

Braves outfielder Ron Gant knows his dream of becoming the first player in baseball history to post three consecutive 30 homer/30 stolen-base seasons is over. With just 11 home runs, he knows he cannot reach 30 in the Braves' remaining 40 games. However, the stolen-base total is a different story; Gant entered the week with 29.

"I'm to the point now where I know it's damn near impossible to do," he says. "I definitely wanted to do it, I just wasn't able to."

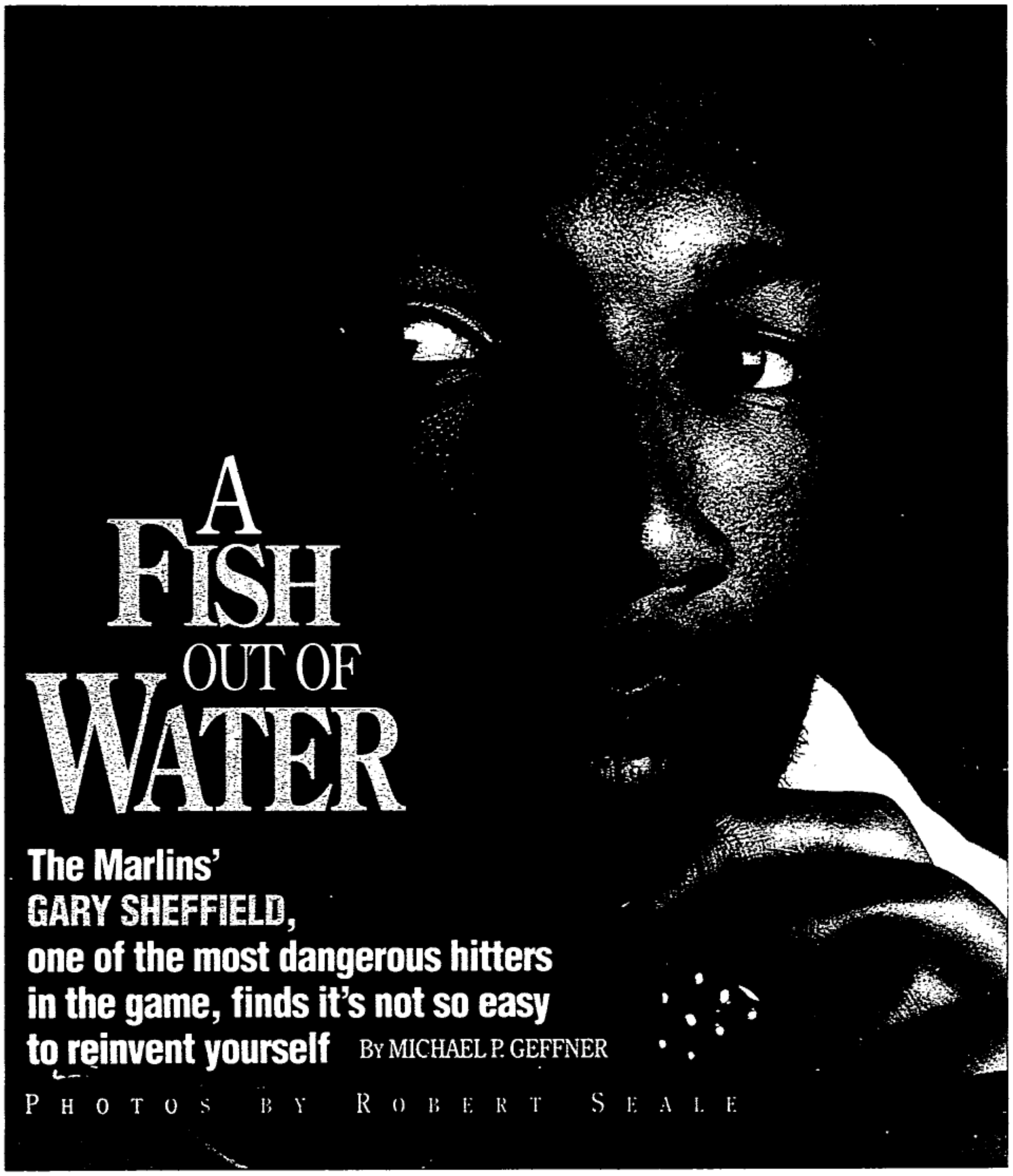
Gant has been mired in a slump since June 8, hitting .196 (43 for 219) in 61 games since then. His power has all but vanished. He has hit just two home runs since June 16 and has 40 strikeouts and 15 RBIs in his last 49 games.

For the season, he is hitting .253 (108 for 427), with 60 RBIs. He also has struck out 83 times, by far the most on the team. In 1990, Gant hit .303 with 32 home runs, 84 RBIs and 33 steals. He hit 32 home runs last season to go with 34 steals. He drove in 105 runs but his average dropped to .251.

Gant says that because he is no longer pursuing 30-30, he might begin relaxing again at the plate.

"It might work to my advantage," he says. "Maybe it will get me up there thinking about base hits, not home runs." ◆

—BILL ZACK



A FISH OUT OF WATER

The Marlins' GARY SHEFFIELD, one of the most dangerous hitters in the game, finds it's not so easy to reinvent yourself

By MICHAEL P. GEFFNER

PHOTOS BY ROBERT SEALE

South Beach, Miami's St. Tropez, is a place of privilege, beauty and quirky self-indulgence — of expensive cars inching, fender-to-freshly-waxed-fender, along a bustling beachfront strip of Ocean Drive; glittering-white sidewalks lined immaculately with palms; and throngs of neon-thonged Rollerbladers, seemingly oblivious to everything in Walkmans and wraparounds, dancing and twirling and whizzing through the streets.

And in the chic heart of what's called the Art Deco district, between 10th and 11th streets, there's the well-known Clevelander's, an outdoor hangout with green-marble tables shaded by dark-green canopies, twin bars by the head of a swimming pool and an obscenely loud jukebox with a bass so juiced you'll swear it's pounding from inside your chest.

The central theme, of course, as with most of the "in" places around here, is not so much about eating and drinking as it is about seeing and being seen. It's an odd place to find someone from so clear across the other side of the tracks, especially someone so introverted and painfully uncomfortable around high society (even though he makes six mil a year), someone who grew up hard in a different kind of Florida, in the ghetto of Tampa's Belmont Heights.

Yet since late March, upon his moving to a Biscayne Bay high-rise just 10 minutes away, Gary Sheffield has made this place his steady lunch spot, coming here nearly every day—when the Marlins are home—and nestling inconspicuously into a somewhat removed corner table facing The Strip.

"I just like to sit here, eat my pasta and watch the people going by," Sheffield says over a late-afternoon lunch, his low, soft voice barely audible above the buzzing din and reggae. "It may not sound like much, but I don't need very much."

On this brilliantly sunny Sunday before a night game against the Dodgers, Sheffield looks like just another beachcomber on the make (though he emphatically denies it): sunglasses, a beige designer baseball cap, matching white-linen shorts and short-sleeve shirt, and brown leather sandals. There's the jewelry, too: diamond studs in both ears, a thin gold chain around his neck and a Rolex he hardly ever checks around his right wrist.

He's sipping iced tea now, having finished off a bowl of pasta he peppered liberally with hot sauce, and lolling back in his chair when a young woman in a short white dress suddenly catches his eye; unlike what you'd expect from a young star athlete, he doesn't leer or say anything, just cranes his neck slightly, following her path, before quickly retreating, never once changing from his expressionless expression. Which brings up some facts about Sheffield: He cracks an emotion about once a day—his smiles flickering out within seconds—and almost never initiates conversation; he's big on eye contact, small on small talk. "I'll be here sometimes," he says, "and I won't be thinking about a thing. And most of the time, I'm not looking to talk to anybody, either. I'm just looking to relax my mind. That's all. Just to get away from everything. This is the way I'm looking at my life now: I just wanna hang out in places like this, with people who have as much—or more—to lose as I do, and just get lost in the crowd."

It is a mindset, mind you, very new to Sheffield, and it wasn't reached during some religious awakening in the middle of the night but all but crashed down on him a day last October, when, while he cruised his old 'hood in his cream-colored Mercedes, some kid just jumped out of the darkness and, without warning, blasted a .25 through Sheffield's window. It was by sheer dumb luck—and a degree of bad aim—that the slug merely grazed his left shoulder, leaving nothing more than a pinkish flesh wound the size of a dime. But it doesn't take a genius to know the outcome easily could have been much different; a few inches here, an inch there, and it strikes him flush in the heart.

To this day, with the case still open and not a single suspect, Sheffield isn't sure whether it was simply an attempted carjacking, a random attack, or something more sinister, like a murder plot, perhaps, by an old acquaintance he once refused money, or even a spurned girlfriend. Actually, he doesn't know what to think anymore. He only knows he's moving in another direction now, and quickly—away, finally, from the roots he always held onto so strongly, and, as some friends assert, away finally from feeling guilty about making it. "It's all definitely in black and white now," he says. "I mean, I always liked hanging around the old neighborhood, and I liked being around ghetto people—I felt comfortable around them—but it's definitely cost me. And I'm not willing to pay the price anymore. A lot of the places I went to, I'm not going anymore. The routes I took, I don't take anymore. Because the old way ain't workin' for me, and it's a time in my life when I don't want to live day-to-day anymore."

Things crystallized for Sheffield just before Christmas, in New York, when by special invitation he attended the premiere of *Waiting To Exhale* and its star-studded after-party. According to those around him that evening, Sheffield was so intimidated by the Hollywood scene he barely moved or uttered a word. "I felt totally out of place," he says. "I mean, even walking down the red carpet was embarrassing for me. I said to myself, 'What

am I doing here? And why am I seated in a VIP section next to Whitney Houston? I'm no star." But then, later, I met Bobby Brown and Al B. Sure, guys who I idolize, and I find out they're big fans of mine. It was really cool, you know. So after that, I'm thinking to myself, 'Maybe I should've been hangin' out with people like this a long time ago. People who don't need me for anything.'"

Sheffield says in reassessing his life he went through a period of downsizing his old friendships. "Cutting throats," is the brutal way he puts it. "But it's not like I'm completely turning my back (on where I grew up). I'm just not hangin' with the guys who are doin' wrong anymore," he says.

It's about more than himself, too. "I'm not afraid of dying," Sheffield says. "Because, the night of the shooting, I was definitely prepared to die right then and there. But it's my (three) kids. I wanna make sure I'm around for them. My kids mean everything to me, and I wanna make sure I'm around to take care of them, to be around and see them grow older."

In nine major league seasons, which puts him at a staggeringly young 27, Gary Antonian Sheffield, the Marlins' cleanup-hitting right fielder, has developed into, arguably, the most dangerous righthanded hitter in the National League and, unarguably, one of the game's most fierce-looking: his black, 32-ounce bat coiled above his head, alternately wagging and whipping and twirling until, for a split second, laying parallel to the ground, it points straight for the pitcher's skull. Not that he's trying to scare anybody. "It's just that I get all excited when I hit," he says with a rare smile. He's a hitter, scouts say, not only without a major weakness, but also with those strong, lightning-quick wrists of his—the wrists Aaron had, the older scouts add—incapable of being blown away by the hardest of fastballs or fooled even by the latest-breaking of breaking balls.

Yet aside from a single extraordinary season (.330, 33 homers, 100 RBIs) with the Padres in 1992, during which he became the first serious challenger for the Triple Crown in a quarter-century, since Carl Yastrzemski in 1967, Sheffield has never really approached what people see as his huge potential. Forever muddled in controversy and short-circuited by injuries. Six lengthy stays on the D.L.—broken index finger, torn thumb ligaments, shoulder problems, broken foot, wrist problems. "It's because of the way I play," he says. "I'm always diving for a ball or sliding hard into a base. I play the game very aggressively. It's the only way I know how."

There's always been the belief, however, that if the on-the-field stuff didn't shorten Sheffield's career, the off-the-field escapades definitely would. Indeed, his list of troubles reads like a cross between a rap sheet and a court docket—scuffles with police; an arrest for driving under the influence; battles for custody and child-support; a paternity suit; women accusing him of abusing and threatening them; stalking by fans, he claims, and harassment by old acquaintances and ex-girlfriends; his house robbed; the windows of his car broken; and, of course, most recently, the shooting incident.

Sheffield accepts blame for only the DUI and one of the scuffles—the one in 1986, when he went to the aid of his uncle, Dwight Gooden, who was being arrested. Everything else, he insists, is either people out to get him or the media blowing things out of proportion. "I'm just a mellow guy," he says. "I'm not some wild animal running around the streets." His longtime agent, Jim Neader, feels it is mostly Gary being at the wrong place at the wrong time—a theory Marlins G.M. Dave Dombrowski has, like most people, a hard time believing. "There's a high percentage against everything being a coincidence," Dombrowski says, "and, yes, I'm greatly concerned (with what Gary's responsibility might be)." He has his own theory: That Sheffield has complicated his life with "unwise decisions ... which have produced consequences that are not going away."

Sheffield admits to having a serious problem with women, especially with dating the wrong ones, and had at least one relationship where he "hit the girl," he says, "but only because she was hitting me. I didn't enjoy it."

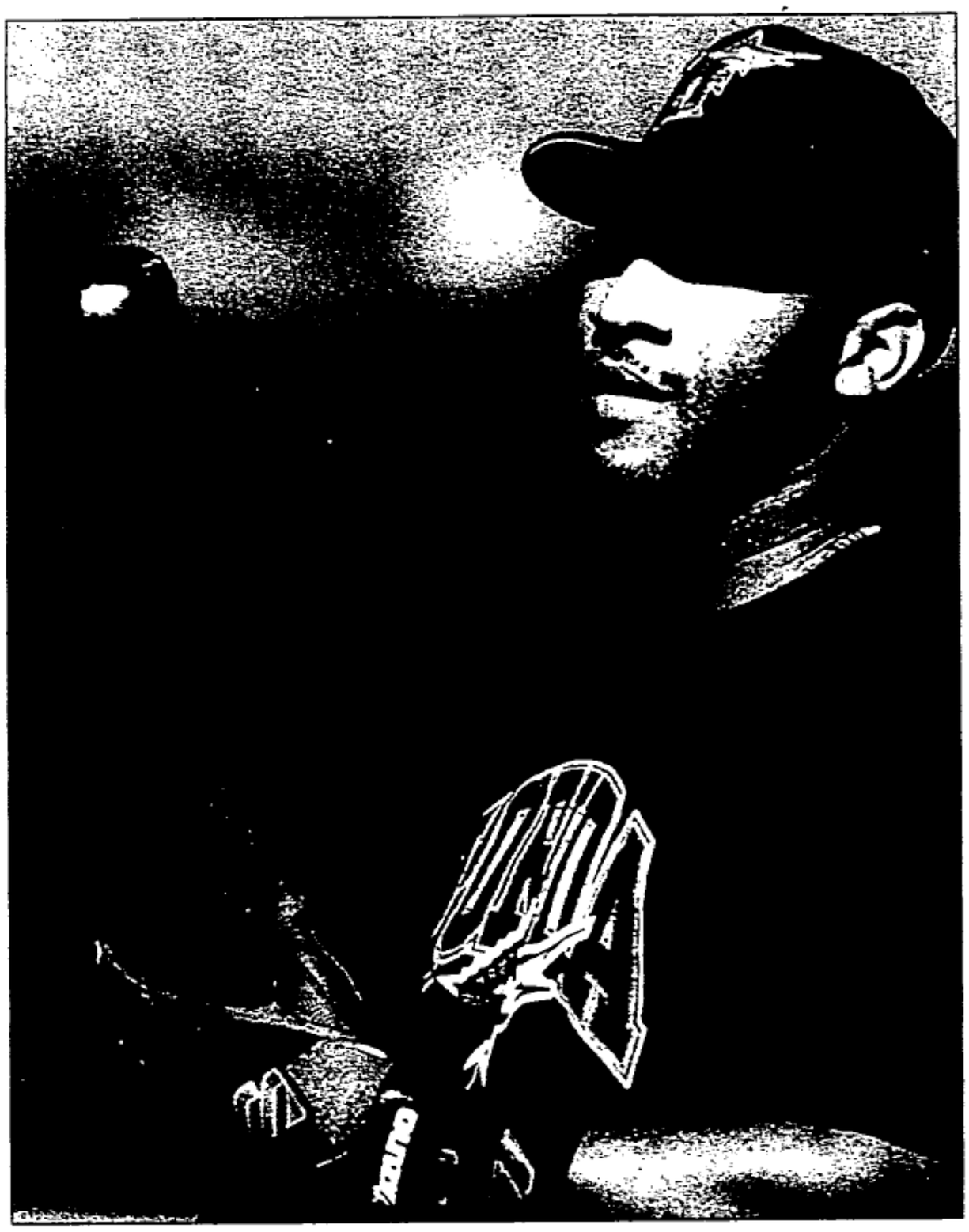
He also has three children by three different women, none of whom he married, and says his relationships with the mothers "aren't very good." His two daughters, Ebony, 10, and Carissa, 8, live with their mothers in Tampa, while his son, Gary Jr., 2, lives with his mother in Phoenix. He sees his daughters frequently, but his son only during major holidays—a situation he's not very happy about. He says, in fact, that the burning desire to be around his children more will likely cause his retirement when his four-year contract expires after 1997. "I can honestly say I don't love baseball as much as I used to," he says. "And I realize now there are a lot of other things I want to do. I mean, it's not like I won't be anything without it. I was Gary before I played and I'll be Gary after. There are just things now in my life I cherish more than baseball. Especially after getting shot."

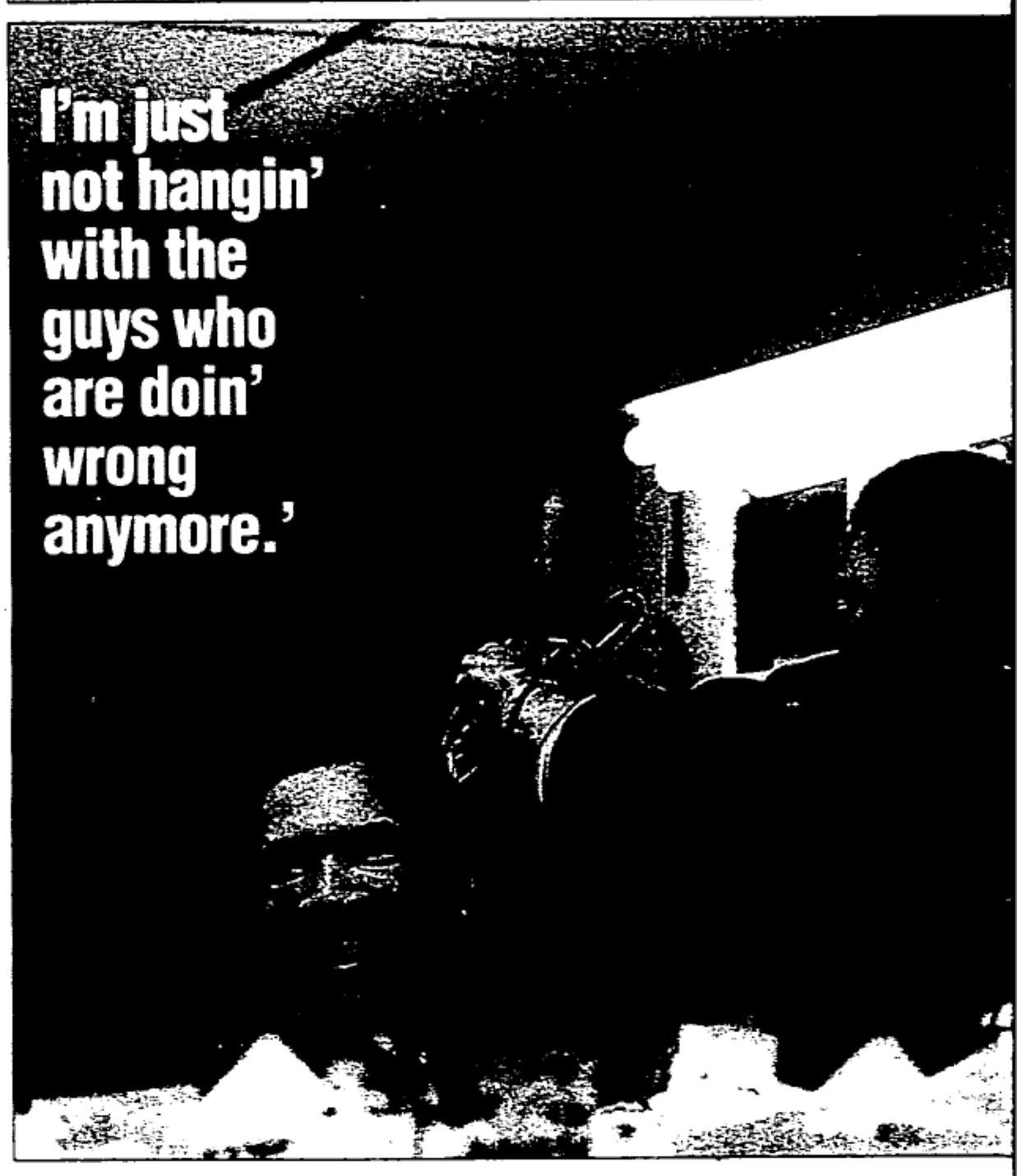
The shooting occurred last October 30, a Monday, after Sheffield returned home from a brief visit to see friends in Atlanta. It was also a day, he says, when nobody knew he was home—he never told anyone of his return date, never called his parents from the airport after landing, and, for that matter, didn't even go straight home to St. Petersburg. Instead, after picking up his Mercedes from the airport parking lot, he headed straight for his old stomping grounds in Tampa, for the sole purpose, he says, of surprising his youngest daughter, Carissa, whom he hadn't seen in a while. But when his first couple of tries didn't catch her at home, he decided simply to kill some time driving around the old neighborhood and maybe even stopping by Coles Barbershop, where he occasionally gets his hair cut for $8 and where one of his best friends, Phil Walker, works.

'It's not like I'm completely turning my back (on where I grew up).

It was around 7 o'clock, just before sundown, when, on his way to Coles, he stopped at a red light at the intersection of 40th Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard. He was in a left-turn lane, with plenty of cars around him. About six, he approximates—a couple in front of him, a couple behind and a couple to the side.

By pure chance, he glanced up at his rearview mirror and what he saw was this: a hunched, shadowy figure racing toward his car. Eventually, he made it out to be a slim, black teenage boy, dressed in a dark shirt and jeans, with very short hair. For the most part, though, Sheffield was unconcerned, figuring it was either a fan wanting an autograph or a friend sneaking up on him as a practical joke.





Sheffield's manner: *The Marlins slugger juggles many roles in his life, from right fielder, to father to three children, to keeping in touch with old friends in the 'hood.*

He was ready to roll down his window, in fact, when, suddenly, he saw this silvery-chrome gun, held sideways, pressed hard to the glass. He remembers the gun's glint striking him square in the eyes, and him squinting as he tried to duck. Then, he says, "everything went real quiet for a second ... before I heard this big thump on the window"—a single gunshot (he only later learned it was a .25) that skimmed off his left shoulder.

"Give it up! Give it up!" he says the boy shouted.

Sheffield was slumped sideways now, playing dead, when the kid started pulling wildly at the handle of his locked door. At that moment, Sheffield somehow managed to get his foot on the gas pedal and speed away ... but then just snapped. His adrenaline surging like crazy, he abruptly made a U-turn to go back for the kid, thinking he had a gun of his own, the one he always keeps in his car—except this time it wasn't there. Damn! He finally remembered he took the gun out before the trip. He says now: "It's something I always do when I leave my car at the airport." Then he pauses, his eyes seeming to drift back to that exact moment, and his lips tighten. "I was pissed off. I mean, there was this rage inside me. The only thing I had in my mind was revenge. And the only thing that saved that man that night was I didn't have mine. That was it. Bottom line. I just slipped that night. But I won't ever slip again. You don't see it, but it's there, it's always there now." Meaning, of course, one of the three guns he has permits for: the Smith & Wesson, the .44 or the 9mm. It's just that he refuses to play scared. He won't hide in his apartment, or look over his shoulder in public, or flinch every time someone comes within 10 feet of him. And nightmares? Never has 'em. Flashbacks? What's that? "I'm just more careful now," he says. And this: tinted car windows. "So if someone ever steps up to my car again," he says with dead calm, "they'll have to think twice about what I may have."

It's a Friday night, two hours before a game in mid-April, and, though he's not scheduled to pitch until the following day, Dwight Gooden is antsy, shifting on a small stool in front of his locker at Yankee Stadium.

"I worry about Gary, worry all the time," Gooden says. "I mean, I love the guy ... he's a really sweet kid, a sensitive kid, he really is, even though he comes across as tough sometimes ... but, you know, there are constantly these things going on with him. And it really concerns me. Like the shooting. Now, I don't know what that was, but I don't think it was a carjacking. That definitely didn't sound like a carjacking to me. So it's like I'm saying to myself, 'What part is Gary playing in all this?' Because, you know, it's been like a constant buildup over the years. It's been a pattern with him."

Gooden, 31, the pitcher of the '80s who plummeted from grace in the '90s, knows something about self-destructive patterns. He has battled alcohol and cocaine addiction for most of his major league career, failing three drug tests and being suspended from baseball twice. Twelve steps later, he's in the midst of

yet another comeback.

"I told Gary recently, 'Hey, man, I want you to know your uncle's back. I've got my life straightened out, and I'm here for you if you want me. If there's anything wrong with you, you can come to me now.'"

But so far, even though the two talk all the time on the phone, Sheffield has yet to reach out for a thing. Which frustrates Gooden.

"I think it's mostly that Gary's made bad choices," he says. "I mean, some of the guys he's hanging with ... he has to know that some of those guys are not good for him. Guys who are just looking to use him. Guys who I've broken off with." He pauses, struggling for the right thought. "For me," he says finally, "if I go around with guys who want me to have a beer just to fit in, and then want me to have another and another, I can't be around those guys. Because then it's off to the drugs."

He's asked if, indeed, he ever suspected Gary's problems to be drug- or alcohol-related, and all of a sudden, he looks away. "Uh ... I don't even want to get into that," he stammers after a cryptically long pause. "I'm in a, you know, a funny position. I can't really get into that."

Then, looking back squarely again, he says: "All I tell Gary is, if he can look in the mirror and say to himself he's happy with what he's doing, then he'll be fine."

Rumors linking Sheffield to drugs, of course, have been around for nearly as long as he's been in professional ball. It likely started out with guilt by association, after Gooden tested positive for the first time, in the spring of 1987; coincidentally or not, that same year, while playing in the low minors, Sheffield claims he was tested four times. "The tests were supposed to be random," he says, "but somehow, each time, my name kept on getting picked out of the hat." Since then, he says, he has been tested at least three more times, twice to buy insurance policies and once by the Marlins (as a matter of club policy) to get his current guaranteed contract.

RICHARD HARBUS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Baseball brothers: *Gooden, who is more like a brother than a cousin to Sheffield, taught him how to play baseball in the projects of Tampa. Many times, Sheffield had no choice. 'Play with me or I'll beat you up,' Gooden would tell him.*

"I've never done drugs, never," Sheffield says, "and I know people don't believe that. But it's true. I mean, if I did drugs, I would definitely say so. And if I ever did drugs, don't you think somebody would've come forward by now and say they sold them to me? I mean, I'm curious about drugs. I can't say that I'm not. But that's not going to make me do them. Bottom line, I was one of the few kids in my neighborhood lucky enough to never put that stuff in my body. And I'm proud of that."

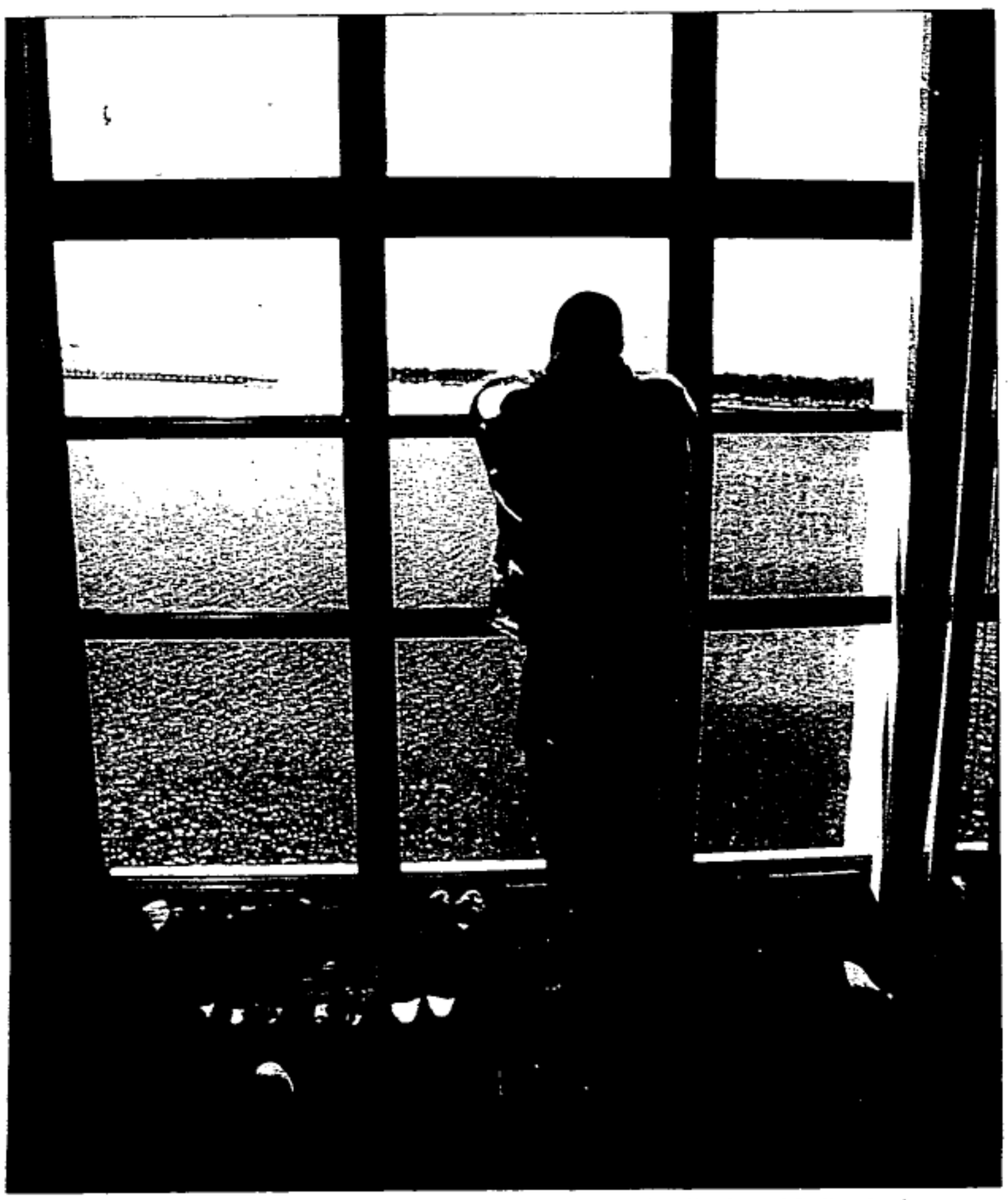
Still, as recently as last season, based on an anonymous tip that he was carrying illicit drugs, Sheffield was pulled off a team plane in Fort Lauderdale and searched thoroughly by sheriff's deputies; he was quickly released after nothing was found but says the experience humiliated and angered him.

"Bring on all the tests," he says, bristling. "Let everybody see my blood and my urine. I don't care. I'm not doing anything wrong. And I've got nothing to hide."

Dombrowski says after seriously reviewing the matter he's confident Sheffield is not involved in drugs. "But do I think Gary has one too many drinks some nights?" he says. "Well, yes, I can see that. Do I think he's an alcoholic? No. There's just a certain recklessness involved here, and some poor decision-making."

Sheffield admits to drinking on occasion—on a given night, he says, nothing more than two beers chased by a 7&7—but doesn't believe he has a problem, even though in December 1993 he was hit with a DUI in Orlando after driving his white Ferrari over 100 mph with a blood-alcohol level slightly over the legal limit; the charge was later reduced to reckless driving. "I guess I had too many beers to be driving that night," he says, "and I was probably driving too fast. But I definitely wasn't drunk."

'If anyone ever steps up to my car again, I'll have to thi



Personal heaven: *Sheffield in his high-rise apartment, enjoys his solitude and Italian loafers.*

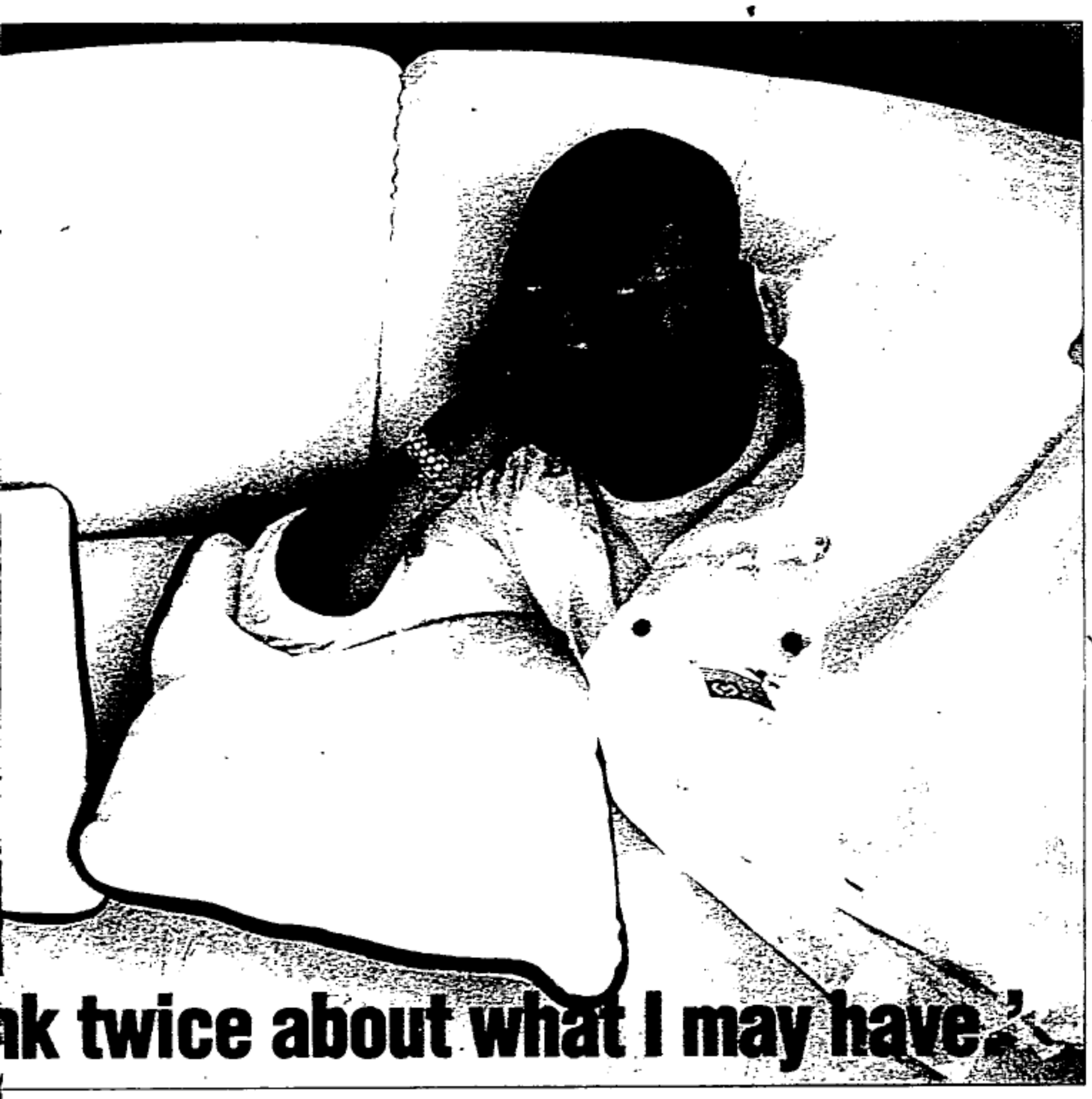
Sheffield was born and raised just outside the Ponce de Leon projects in a section of Tampa called Belmont Heights, where "people got shot, robbed, stabbed, killed, everything," Gooden says. Gary was an only child, strangely quiet, and, from the time he was a baby, carried the embarrassing nickname of Bug (shortened from Beetle Bug, given to him by his grandfather) because of his then-bulging eyes and rusty-red hair; he was also a terribly hyper kid who constantly got into mischief. His father, Harold, a hard, taciturn man who worked the Tampa shipyards, would punish him mostly by locking him in his room. "I was punished so much it reached the point where I became real comfortable with being alone in my room and amusing myself," Sheffield says. "I think that's why I've never needed to be around people to be happy and why I still love just sitting in my room alone watching TV."

His father laid down the law—chores after school, absolutely no profanity and in bed by 10 o'clock sharp—and his mother, Betty, spoiled him to death. He freely admits to being a Mama's Boy, even to this day. "There's no one in this world I feel closer to," he says, "or who I trust more. And we're exactly alike—honest, caring, generous (to a fault) and stubborn."

It wasn't until Gary was 11 years old that he found out Harold wasn't his real father. Harold, whose last name, in fact, is Jones, married Betty when Gary was 2. "I forget who let it out—maybe it was Dwight—but it was during an argument," he says. "And, at first, I was real angry about it. Like I was living a lie. I didn't want to believe it. I mean, we looked so much alike." (In recent years, Sheffield has had several contacts with his biological father, a small-time Tampa businessman who once owned a popular local pool hall, but Sheffield says, "It's not a good relationship.")

Curiously, it was around the time of this unsettling discovery that Sheffield began displaying bizarre fits of temper, like, after being benched for missing a practice, chasing his Little League coach around the field with a bat (it resulted in Sheffield's getting banned from the championship game) and fighting at the drop of a hat. "I didn't start fights, I ended them," he says, making what he feels is an important distinction. "I minded my own business, but if people bothered me or did something like call my mother a name, I did what I had to do. I didn't care how big the guy was or how old. In my neighborhood that's how you got respect. And when I fought, I always wanted to do some damage, see some blood. I wasn't happy unless I did that. And nobody ever got the best of me—except Dwight."

Sheffield says unashamedly that he fought



...k twice about what I may have.'

his way "to the top" of a gang of project kids called the Alleycats, broke windows of neighborhood homes—just for the hell of it—with rocks and ultimately armed himself with brass knuckles and a gun ("And I wasn't afraid to use it," he adds quickly).

"I enjoyed pushing things to the limit," he says, "but I don't think I ever went over (the line). But there were still people in the neighborhood who said I'd never be anything, that I'd end up in jail someday."

He learned how to play baseball from Uncle Dwight, who, being four years his senior, was more like an older brother—and a bullying one at that—than anything else. For a time, before their teens, the two lived in the same house together, and, on weekends, Dwight would wake up at the crack of dawn, quickly grab a ball, bat and glove, and, without mercy, pull the sheets off his still-sleeping nephew and yank him out of bed by the feet. "Play with me or I'll beat you up," Dwight would bark. Sheffield remembers: "He wouldn't let me eat breakfast, shower, nothing." They would jump a fence to a deserted lot near the house, a field that was mostly clumps of dirt, rocks, and broken glass, and Dwight started off by hitting grounders as hard as he could—and forcing Gary to field them. The balls, of course, would invariably glance off something, hop high and often at a wicked angle and smack Gary repeatedly in the chest, off the shoulders and sometimes even in the mouth. "It would end up with him crying most of the time," Gooden says, "and he was always saying that one day he'd get me back for this." When it was Gary's turn to hit, however, Dwight, rather than taking the field, would work on his pitching, throwing almost exclusively fastballs, but "even as a little kid," Gooden says, "Gary could hit me pretty good."

At Hillsborough High, the same school Gooden pitched for, Sheffield started out as a thin, punch-hitting second baseman, but by the end of his junior year had grown into a powerfully built 175 without ever having stepped foot in a weight room. He says the secret to his startling growth was something called "Crazy Bread," sold at the local pizzeria. "It was like a garlic bread, and I'd dip it into tomato sauce," he says. "I ate it nearly every day for a year."

Billy Reed, Sheffield's high school coach, remembers mostly this about Sheffield: huge thighs, blazing bat speed, cockiness and a snapping temper. "Gary was real quiet most of the time, and I never had a problem with him," Reed says, "but he was like a rattlesnake. If you messed him over, he'd bite you. And if you were a teammate who didn't hustle, he'd get all over you in a hurry."

By his senior year, many were convinced Sheffield was simply the best high school player in the country.

"When I first saw him in high school, he reminded me of a young Eddie Murray," says John Young, who scouted for the Rangers then but is now the Cubs' assistant to the G.M. "He was the real deal. In fact, if you based it just on ability, he could've jumped right into the big leagues, I think. Even at 17, he carried himself like a pro."

In 1986, Sheffield was the Brewers' first-round choice and the draft's sixth pick overall. Signing for $155,000, he ended up playing three years in the minors, distinguishing himself significantly as a major league talent and a major league pain in the ass. Although he averaged 20 homers and 98 RBIs a season, he was also frequently fined for various offenses, quit the team once after a spat with his manager and late one season made an error on purpose, throwing a fielded grounder in the stands after earlier being charged for an error he felt he was no error at all. Despite this, the Brewers jumped him from Class AA to Class AAA to the bigs in 1988, when he was 19.

Sheffield doesn't trust easily. The Brewers? Forget it. He stopped trusting them his first full season, in 1989, after being shipped back to the minors—with the hint he was tanking it—when all along he simply had a broken right foot that was misdiagnosed. "He wasn't a very happy camper after that," says former Brewers manager Tom Trebelhorn, now minor league coordinator of instruction for the Orioles. "We pretty much lost him at that point. And the funny thing is, he could've trusted me with his life back then, but he didn't."

Sheffield disliked—and felt suspiciously apart from—almost all of his Brewers teammates, whom he once likened to "a bunch of girls," and veterans like Jim Gantner and Paul Molitor, who only taught "me how to be selfish." But this paled in comparison to his passionate loathing for then-G.M. Harry Dalton, who according to Sheffield would call him into his office about twice a week "to do nothing more than berate and threaten me, never to encourage me." Dalton did not return phone calls for this story.

In four injury-plagued seasons in Milwaukee, Sheffield underachieved to the tune of .259, with 31 homers and 133 RBIs.

Says Trebelhorn, "Gary's a good kid and he played hard for me, but while he was physically equipped for any challenge, at the time he wasn't emotionally equipped. And he didn't quite have the personality to get his teammates to put their arms around him, the maturity to extend himself to them. So, unfortunately, it ended up with him going into a shell and the players not really caring."

Sheffield was traded to San Diego for virtually nothing before the start of the '92 season, and on the first day with his new club, then Padres manager Greg Riddoch sat him down in the dugout and told him: "My only expectation of you is to put a smile back on your face and start enjoying the game again." Riddoch remembers now: "The whole time we talked, he looked me straight in my eyes, which told me he was not only sincere but confident."

Sheffield couldn't have had a more perfect situation—a change of scenery to one of the most beautiful, laid-back cities in baseball and batting third between Tony Gwynn and Fred McGriff. His first season finished with him becoming, at 23, the youngest batting champion in 30 years and placing third in the MVP voting.

In June 1993, as part of the Padres' infamous fire sale, Sheffield was sent to the Marlins for, in essence, reliever Trevor Hoffman, then, before the next season, Sheffield signed a four-year contract worth $22.45 million. And

though he has been injured for most of his time in Florida, he has nevertheless been highly productive: his previous two seasons, a total of 43 homers, 124 RBIs and 31 stolen bases in 150 games. This year, he tied a major league record for homers in April (11) and so far has played in every game despite severe pain in his right (throwing) shoulder. "I don't want any off-days," he says. "I want to earn my money."

On the urging of the P.R. woman he hired immediately after the shooting, Marvet Britto, Sheffield moved from a rented house in Miami Lakes to a highly secured high-rise along the water. "It's relaxing to just look out my window," he says. It's a duplex apartment on the penthouse level, and he has been sharing it with his boyhood friend, Vance Lovelace, 32, a former major league pitcher who was up for a cup of coffee in the '90s and who, at 6 feet 7, 245 pounds and with a shaved head, is often mistaken for Shaq. "Having Vance there just helps Gary's mom sleep at night," Britto says. There are marble floors, mirrored walls, white sofas covered with mounds of clothes and a clear plexiglass staircase leading up to his bedroom, where he's in his personal heaven, watching his 40-inch TV in bed and clutching the remote control.

His eyes glued to a basketball game between the Magic and the Hornets, he's talking about how nice it's going to be being retired and living in the house he's having built along the Gulf Coast in St. Petersburg. He calls it his "dream house," a place that'll be so perfectly self-contained that he won't have to deal much with the outside world anymore. He says it will have a game room, a weight room, a movie theater, tennis courts and a full-size basketball court with a computer scoreboard.

It will also have this: a 6-foot-high concrete wall on all sides and infra-red beams scanning up to 300 feet in all directions. "That way," he says, "before anyone has a chance to get to me, I'll have time to do what I have to do." Strangely, he punctuates this sentiment with a small giggle.

By the time the house is finished, around August 1997, the total cost will be in the neighborhood of $2.6 million—but it will be completely paid for. "So if anything happens to me," he says somewhat darkly again, "my kids won't have to worry about paying it off." His kids, by the way, are part of the dream; he wants all three to live with him there (even though he realizes custody rights might get in the way). Then he wants to, finally, get married—"to someone who has a career and a life apart from me," he says—and have two more kids.

"I just want to live a normal life, the way I did before I played professional baseball, before people knew who I was," he says. "And after I'm done, with all I've been through in my baseball career, I'm done with work. I just wanna play some basketball, watch TV and take my boat out on the water and fish."

That very night, Sheffield hit a three-run homer to beat the Dodgers, a 419-foot shot to dead center field. But it was during his home-run trot that something truly weird happened. Instead of running the bases, as usual, with his head down and his arms tight to his body, he suddenly, out of nowhere, was transformed into the utter spirit of Kirk Gibson: Rounding first, he broke into this big, gritted-teeth grin, pumped a fist, punched the air and windmilled his arm wildly. Later, in the clubhouse, he would say it was the most excited he's ever gotten on the baseball field.

Long afterward, though, you couldn't help but wonder if it was just Gary Sheffield, at last, simply letting go. ◆

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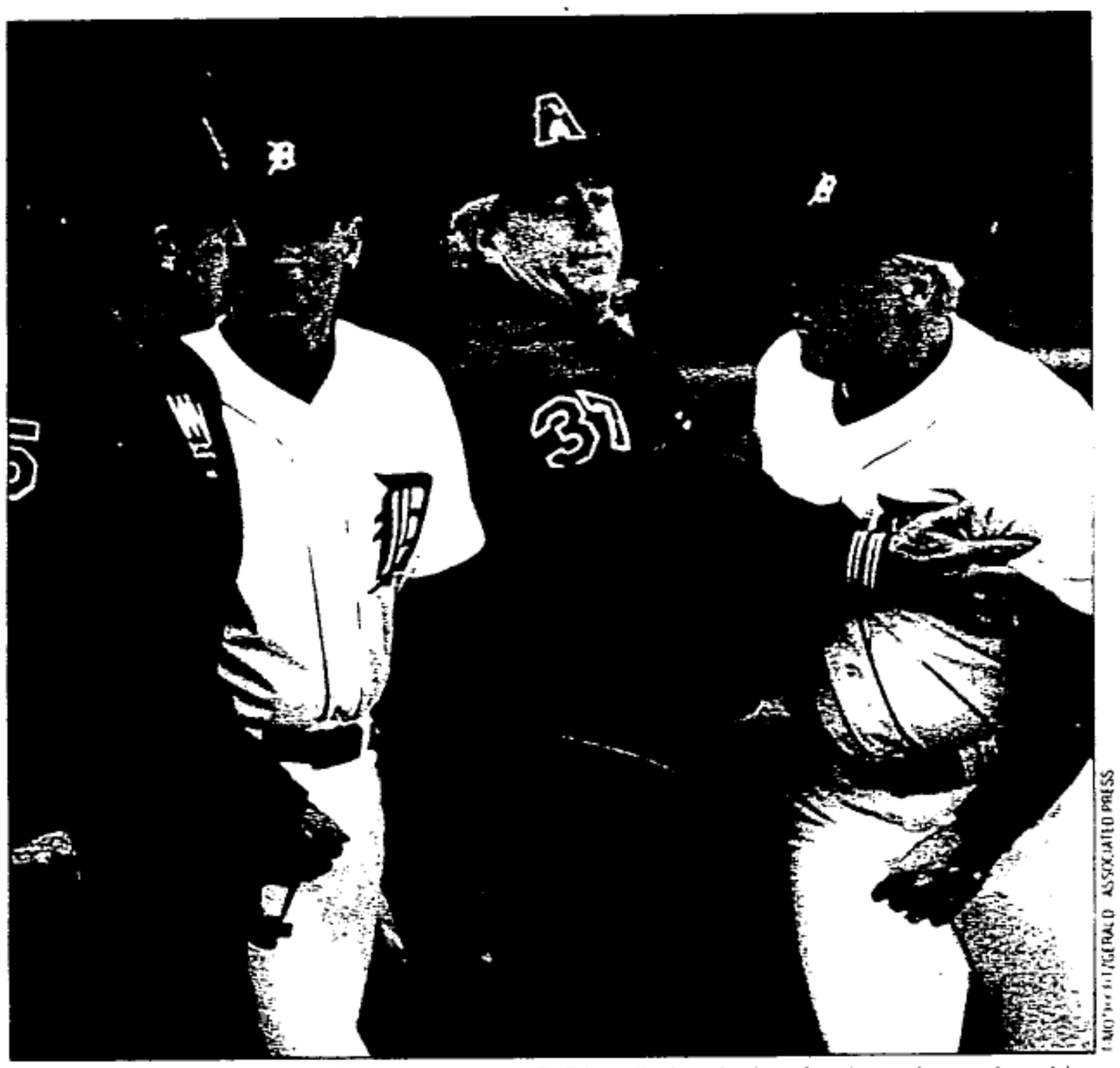
When bad teams happen to good people

First-year manager Buddy Bell struggles to find solutions for the hapless Tigers

Michael **KNISLEY**



Sometimes, it gets to you: *For the most part, Bell has displayed a lot of patience, but at times his temper overflows, as in a recent game where he had to be restrained by umpire Drew Coble.*

If you take this stuff home with you," Cecil Fielder says, "it'll kill you." So I ask Buddy Bell if he takes losing home with him. If he brings losing with him when he walks through the door at night to his wife, Gloria. If he carries losing around during his time with his children, David, Michael, Ricky, Kristi and Traci.

"Oh, yeah," Bell says, without even a second's caution, and I know he isn't lying because his eyes scream they've been open far too long. So I ask him how he's sleeping, and again there is no hesitation before he answers.

"This ain't the freshest I've been in a while. I don't sleep as well as I used to. Once I get there, I'm OK. But sometimes, it's hard to get there."

Losing isn't going to kill Buddy Bell, but it is going to lay him low for a long time. Every now and then, he breathes the fresh air of hope, like when the Tigers took two of three from the Yankees a couple of weeks back. It didn't last, of course, but it kept him going through a few more series, until he could find another breath unpolluted by errors and elephantine earned-run averages.

Bell's first team as a manager is going to make a run at the modern-day major league record for losses in a season, set 34 years ago by the expansion Mets, who were 40-120 under Casey Stengel. The Tigers, at 18-54 through last Thursday, were losing 75 percent of their games, which extrapolates to 122 losses over 162 games. They're that bad because they ran most of their real major-leaguers off after the last two losing seasons, during which owner Mike Ilitch paid a bloody fortune for winning percentages of .417 (1995) and .461 (1994).

The Tigers aren't just rebuilding this season. They've gone back to the primordial ooze to evolve again.

"Back when I came up," Fielder says, "if you weren't prepared to play in the big leagues, you didn't play in the big leagues. You spent time in minor league ball until you were ready. You look around this clubhouse. These kids played Double-A and Triple-A, and how many years did they play in the minor leagues? And how much success did they have in the minor leagues? To me, you have to be putting up some bang to be in the big leagues."

So Bell goes into the ninth inning in Baltimore early in June behind 10-6, and his kids start a rally. Duane Singleton, who had 31 major league at-bats before this season, draws a walk. Eddie Williams, who has bounced around baseball for 10 years or so but didn't last an entire season with a big-league club until he played in 97 games for the Padres in '95, singles.

Now Raul Casanova is up. Casanova, a catcher, has been a major-leaguer for 12 days, during which he's hitting .069; and in this game, he's already 0-for-4. On another team in another year, a manager pinch hits for him. On the Tigers in 1996, Bell sends Casanova to the plate.

"I don't know," Bell says, and this time there is some hesitation. "First of all, if he's hitting .069 in two years, he's probably not going to be here. Secondly, he's a young kid, and we want to find out about him. And thirdly, what would our other choices have been?"

A quick look down the bench answers the question about his other choices. Kimera Bartee. Mark Parent. John Flaherty. Still, the explanations for Casanova's plate appearance sound as if they come from the player development department, not the manager's office. The manager thinks about winning *this* game, not a game two years from now.

Bell is managing with shackles. The truest tests of a manager's style and ability come in the tense moments of the game, the close moments when his decisions most affect the outcome. The late-inning moves, the pinch hitters, the defensive shifts, the critical hit-and-run calls, the timely pitching change to offset the hitter's strength.

Who knows whether Bell can manage? With this team, his chances to make those decisions come once in a blue moon. When his pitchers give up six runs in the first two innings, they take away his hit-and-run, his stolen base, his suicide squeeze.

So in early June in Baltimore with two on and two out in the ninth inning, Bell sends Raul Casanova to the plate with an .069 batting average. And Casanova singles. Bell breathes in some hope along with another loss, this one by 10-7.

The Tigers hired Bell for a number of reasons. One of them is his baseball heritage, started by his father, Gus, who played 15 years in the majors, and continued by his two oldest sons, David and Michael—David plays for the Cardinals; Michael is in the Rangers' farm system. Another is his good nature. A third is the patience with which he has been blessed.

Or bedeviled.

"I think it's a curse," Bell says after a recent loss. "I'd rather just blow up right now. I don't think any of us need that right now; but for me, it'd be nice. I guess some guys like to come in here and throw food around and piss and moan and hammer people. I think if I were more like that, I probably would feel better. If I could get rid of some of that, then I would maybe sleep a little better."

Someday, Buddy Bell will sleep better, if he can survive the Tigers' evolutionary process. It's just that sometimes, it's hard to get there. ◆

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