

## Introduction: Major League Encounters

**By Larry LaRue**

Millions of us grow up wanting to play in the big leagues and each season 750 men do.

Thirty teams, 25 players each. It's an exclusive club. There are a few more on the disabled list, but they're never really certain the job they had when they were first injured will be open when they return.

It's the nature of the major league game. For every player who is put on a roster, another is removed. We tend to look at the exceptions, like Jamie Moyer, and think all careers last decades.

Most last less than three years.

The minute I began covering the game late in the summer of 1979, people began asking me for stories about the players.

My father loved hearing them. My friends would ask what Reggie Jackson was really like, what talking to Willie Mays was like. A few years ago, I began writing down the tales of the men I'd covered, planning to give them to my daughter. That's how this book began, although it wasn't a book at the time.

As the collection of stories grew, I realized again how unique are the men who play major league baseball. They aren't young gods of sport; they are men with either great physical gifts or enormous drive – and sometimes both.

And still, it isn't always enough.

Major league baseball devours great players and breaks hearts not just every spring, but almost every day of the year. They've all grown up being the best on their teams, and most have never failed at anything – at least not on the field.

But at the big league level, they encounter obstacles that never existed for them elsewhere. Relentless travel and a 162-game season wear their bodies down.

Early in their careers, they don't play regularly, and sometimes they platoon with another player – something they've never been asked to do before.

Balls that were hits at every other level are outs in the majors, where defenders routinely steal them.

I remember when the Seattle Mariners drafted Jeff Clement in the first round, and after proper minor league seasoning he was brought up. One of the first pitchers he faced was then-Toronto ace Roy Halladay.

Not only did Halladay dominate Seattle that night, he threw pitches that Clement – a catcher – had never seen before.

“I don’t even know what those pitches were,” Clement told me afterward.

That’s the size of the transition.

And every first-time, big league player suffers that transition. The truth is, most don’t adjust. When there are 40,000 fans in the park, when the manager is glaring and teammates are counting on them, pitchers often lose the strike zone and hitters expand it by wildly chasing anything airborne.

After the Mariners had blown through a half-dozen rookie pitchers one season, I asked manager Lou Piniella if he thought he was hard on young pitchers.

“Not as hard as they are on me,” he said.

Which makes every one of those 750 major league players a special case. They are judged almost daily on how well they play, and they all know that every team has the depth to explore options.

You’re slumping? There’s a kid in Class AAA that’s tearing it up and looks ready. Had a tough run out of the bullpen? There’s always a young arm – or a veteran hoping for another shot – waiting somewhere.

What I enjoyed as much as anything I saw on the field, were the moments before and after games, talking to the players, coaches and managers.

A common denominator?

Only one. Each of them had been enchanted by baseball as kids. Managers in their 60s and players in their 30s – they’re all in love with a game that lets them put on a uniform each day and play.

It cost many their wives and created thousands of kids who saw more of their dads on television than they did at home. Many players are good enough to stay in the game for years – just not with the same team. So they move, sometimes two or three times in a season. But none of that matters. They still love baseball.

The money helps. The major league minimum salary is close to \$450,000. The average is skewed by players such as Alex Rodriguez, who signed a \$275 million, over-10-year contract with the New York Yankees.

Still, to a man, they played the game for far less – often for nothing – before getting to the majors. Most minor league players have off-season jobs.

When baseball struck in 1981, one of the Angels outfielders, Larry Harlow, had to work construction with a friend to make ends meet. The difference between staying on a big league roster or being sent out to the minors can force players in their mid to late-20s out of the sport.

They can’t support a family on a minor league salary.

And still, walking away from baseball is the most difficult decision most players will have made in their lives.

Late in his career, I asked Reggie Jackson if he could picture his final day in uniform.

“No,” he said. “And I know it’s coming.”

There may be no place in the world quite like a big league clubhouse, and every retired player – or beat writer – I know admits they miss that atmosphere as much as the game itself.

In the clubhouse, men under pressure become child-like again.

I remember Bret Boone running through the clubhouse wearing nothing but motorcycle chaps one day. Jay Buhner outdid him. Jay ran screaming from the clubhouse to the training room one morning wearing only a bagel.

When he returned to his locker he pulled the bagel off and took a bite. Ken Griffey Jr. laughed so hard, he fell off his stool.

Outrageous dares, kangaroo courts, mock rages and occasionally real ones, none of it scripted.

Non-players entered at their own risk. I've seen a player give complete interviews to television crews who believed he was someone else, all the time puzzled by his bizarre answers.

Yes, Virginia, players love fun. At anyone's expense.

In Kansas City, the Royals had a camera crew on the field before each series, freshening up mug shots of players for their enormous outfield scoreboard.

A photo crew mistook Seattle reserve infielder Jeff Schaefer for outfielder Dave Cochrane one afternoon, and Schaefer happily posed for the crew – the bill of his cap turned up, his dark glasses askew, and a very strange smile on his face.

No matter how many retakes the crew asked for, they got the same look.

That night, when Cochrane first came to the plate, the Royals scoreboard showed an enormous picture of Schaefer. Players in the Mariners dugouts were in hysterics.

Even Cochrane, bat in hand at the plate, had to back away for a moment.

In the 32 years I've covered major league baseball, I've dealt with more than a few thousand players, coaches and managers. I began with the belief that none of them owed me their time, so I always asked for it.

Over the years, players have said things to me in anger, in frustration, and as long as we were talking one-on-one, I would ask them afterward if they were sure that's what they wanted to say.

I wasn't trying to change their story. I certainly wasn't averse to a scoop.

But knowing a player well, I could tell when what he was saying was totally out of character. Twice, I told a player I was going to hold the quote overnight and ask again the next day.

Covering big league baseball is a long-term proposition. My theory was not to burn a player who clearly was speaking emotionally, especially if he was talking only to me.

Clubhouse outbursts? Once they were seen, they were fair game.

To cover a beat well, however, you have to build relationships, not just write stories. Publishing a foolish quote that's apologized for the next day may get you higher placement for the day, but it burns that player – and likely others – as viable interviews for years.

That didn't mean I covered for players or teams. When Milton Bradley or Ichiro or Randy Johnson said something outrageous, not in the heat of the moment but as a statement of belief, I wrote it.

When the best player I ever covered, Ken Griffey Jr., had lost so much interest in games he wasn't playing, he began napping in the clubhouse, I verified it and wrote it.

It ended a 20-year relationship I considered my favorite in the game.

The stories included here aren't meant to be full biographies, just moments, encounters, with a cross-section of major league players. Some went to the Hall of Fame. Others barely cracked the lineup with any regularity.

All of them let me into their worlds, and I've found their candor, humor and humanity worth writing about for more than half my life. They weren't all great players. They weren't all great men.

On any given day, however, they are one of only 750 men in the world to play big league baseball.

And that alone made them special.

***Larry LaRue, a sportswriter at the Tacoma News Tribune, covers the Seattle Mariners. If you want to read his daily reportage on news about the team, you should go to <http://www.thenewstribune.com/sports/mariners/> To be his friend on Facebook go to <http://www.facebook.com/#!/kwlarue> and to be one of his tweethearts go to <https://twitter.com/LarryLaRue> His book, Major League Encounters, can be ordered at [www.readerpublishing.com](http://www.readerpublishing.com).***