

# Long Island

Section **14**

O P I N I O N

## To Norm Sherry, Wherever You Are

By HOWARD WEINSTEIN

**T**HERE was a time when giants walked among us. And even lived next door.

Not mythical tall people — professional athletes. Today's younger fans may not believe it, but superstars didn't always command multiyear contracts exceeding the gross national product of many countries. Nowadays, it seems even journeyman ballplayers receive annual seven-figure sums.

During my 1960's "Wonder Years" childhood, Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays topped the sports paycheck pyramid at \$100,000 a year — big bucks back then. But hundred-grand players were rare. Most teams included guys who needed off-season jobs to make ends meet.

Few ballplayers lived in mansions, dwelling instead in city apartments and suburban homes. If they could afford to own houses at all, they were often in heartland hometowns to which players would return annually, like migrating birds. Their sports-season residences were usually rentals.

This led to encounters that probably don't happen much anymore, considering the celebrity status conferred upon sports figures these days. In our teens, my friends and I used to go to Rangers hockey games at Madison Square Garden. When we rode the Long Island Rail Road home from the city afterward, it wasn't uncommon for us to spot players in business suits sharing the train with us.

They were headed for Long Beach, responding like natives to the conductor's call of "Chaaaange at Ja-

maica!" Long Beach was a veritable Canadian colony in those winters, with a large contingent of Rangers calling the seaside community home during hockey season. Why? Simple supply and demand: when snow swirls across deserted beaches and boardwalks, summer houses can be leased for the proverbial song.

I got to thinking about all these connections not long ago, after some lucky folks in New Jersey found an old baseball in the family attic — signed, it just so happens, by Babe Ruth. But collectibles were not always so, and this ball had remained

### A paean to a ballplayer a boy could not forget.

hidden for decades, its very existence forgotten. Once discovered, of course, it was worth a small fortune.

I, too, once had an autographed baseball. Signed by Norm Sherry.

Who?

Norm Sherry, catcher for the dismal 1963 Mets, traded by the Los Angeles Dodgers to a team many New Yorkers may remember fondly, but truly one of the worst teams in history. And Sherry wasn't even the starting catcher.

He was back-up for a guy bearing the memorable moniker of Choo-Choo Coleman, who literally did not hit his weight that season, and drove in all of nine runs. You don't have to be a baseball fanatic to know those are not the stats of a star.

Norm Sherry's batting average was even worse, although he actually

drove in more runs than Coleman, and in half the playing time. But, as it turned out, Sherry's single season with the maladroit Mets was the coda to his career: 197 major-league games, spread out over five years. His lifetime statistics barely equalled one season's output for a mediocre starter.

Ironically, had he lingered one more year with the Dodgers, he would have had a championship ring to show for his short time in "the show." But Sherry had no such luck: while the Dodgers went on to sweep the World Series against my mighty Yankees, he toiled for the Mets.

As for my white-horsehide, red-stitched, genuine Norm Sherry-autographed, official big-league baseball ... well, I lost track of it years ago. And we've established that Norm is not enshrined in Cooperstown. So, even if I could find it, this ball would be of dubious value to all but the most obsessive collector of Mets memorabilia.

All of which raises a few perfectly valid questions. How and why did I even have a genuine Norm-Sherry-autographed, official big-league baseball? And why does this now middle-aged fan wish he still had that ball?

Why do I recall Norm Sherry at all?

Because, for one season, in simpler times, Norm Sherry lived around the corner from my house. Right there in East Meadow, Long Island, New York — an actual major-league ballplayer!

Because, on long-gone, lazy summer mornings, he was kind enough not to mind when small, sunburned boys made the bicycle pilgrimage to his door, rang the bell and asked him to sign our treasures.

So ... thank you, Norm Sherry, wherever you are. ■

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