

Sunday, July 26, 1998

For two championship seasons Jim Bouton was a terrific pitcher. It all begins there. For 30 years he was a pariah to the Yankees, a social outcast who could not come home. That gets us up to yesterday, Oldtimers' Day, the day the Yankees honor their past.

The Yankees invited him back to Yankee Stadium. They had his No. 56 hanging in a locker, had a cap that he could brush off in the motion of delivering the ball to the one batter he faced. At the age of 59, it could never be like the old days.

Life had changed. His first marriage had dissolved, and he was remarried. His place in life had changed. A man does not easily step back into his footsteps after the death of a child. Perhaps you heard about the open Father's Day letter his son Michael wrote appealing to the Yankees that enough time had passed, and that they should invite that old pitcher back.

Put it this way: "What a day, what a week, what a month, what a year, what a life," Bouton said. "I don't know where one emotion leaves and another takes over."

His reception from the packed stadium was rich with cheers. Perhaps there was some understanding of what had gone on with the man in all those years as an outcast. Certainly, he felt what had changed around the remodeled and redecorated clubhouse, and what was the same. "I still see it as it was; I don't see it as it is," he said, trying to put the jumble of pieces together in his mind.

Lesser players had been invited back. But Bouton had the book published in 1970. It was "Ball Four," written with and guided by sports-

writer Len Shecter, and it changed forever the way sports are written about, and the way Bouton was seen.

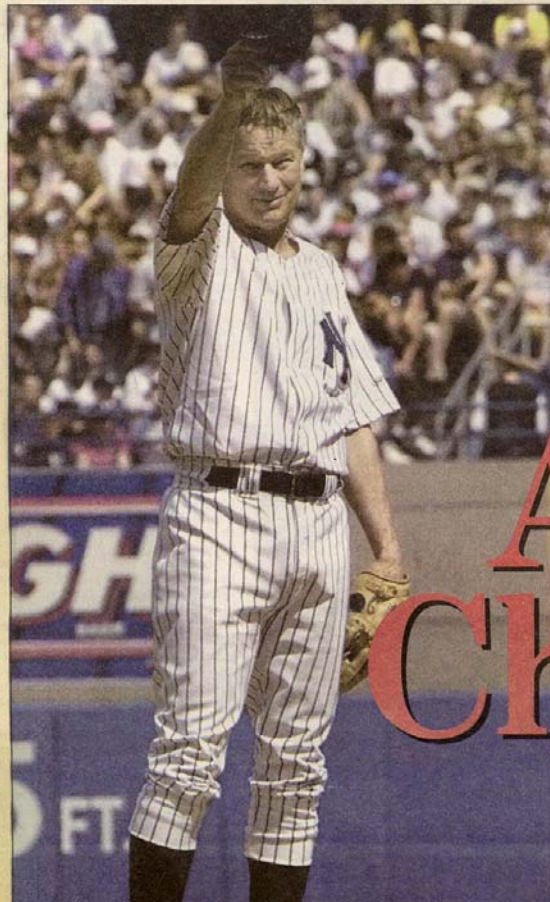
"Fans wanted to know what's it like in the dugout, and what's it like in the clubhouse," Bouton reflected. He and Shecter told them, and people who read it loved it and laughed at what they said. The old guard gritted teeth, and the Yankees regarded it as betrayal.

He wrote that players on the U.S. Steel of baseball teams had fun, and told some of the kind of fun they had. He wrote that Mickey Mantle hit a home run in the haze of a hangover and, when he returned to the dugout, said, "Boys, you don't know how hard that was." And of team members playing peeping Tom on the roof of the Shoreham Hotel, and how one player packed a drill and a mirror on the road to improve the craft. And

sometimes one of the young men on the team would find the company of a young woman.

Mostly the players went unnamed. It's still funny stuff, however benign by today's standards. He really hurt nobody, but the ethics of baseball said it wasn't done. Bowie Kuhn, the commissioner, demanded that Bouton make a public statement that he exaggerated, which he refused to do. And Michael Burke, then president of the Yankees, wrote a note saying, "I, on the other hand, loved it."

By then he had served time on lesser teams. What made the book work was that he had been a notable player, and it was about those icons who were made of flesh. They always looked askance at his debates on gun control with the late Steve Hamilton, that wonderful Kentuckian, and with



Jim Bouton acknowledges Oldtimers Day cheers after being invited back to the Stadium for the first time in nearly 30 years. The crowd included friends of his late daughter Laurie, of whom Bouton said, "She set this all up."



Newsday Photos / Paul J. Berewill

A New Chapter

An emotional Yankee homecoming for Bouton

STEVE JACOBSON, PAGE C2

any Fellowship of Christian Athletes member on the concept of freedom from religion. Bouton was a pioneer voice in the Players Association. Worse, to the Yankees, was that he would deal with the press with wit and insight even when they lost.

In 1963, his second season, he was 21-7. In the World Series sweep by the Dodgers, he lost Game 3, 1-0. In '64 he was 18-13. He won two games in the Series against the Cardinals. Then he broke down. His success was always at the edge of his envelope. "I always felt I was a souped-up Volkswagen in the Indianapolis 500," he said. "If the glove compartment flew open, I was in the infield." For the next 13 years he was the last Yankee pitcher to win a World Series game.

My children spent a lot of time with the Bouton children in New York and in spring trainings. We spent social evenings with Jim and Bobbie, his first wife. When I was in the hospital anticipating brain surgery, which didn't happen, they saw that Anita, my wife, had dinner and a place to cry. When I went home he gave me a tree and a bottle of champagne, which we opened together when Lenny died.

The book turned his life. He played a small role in a movie. He was an interesting TV sportscaster at ABC and CBS, but an iconoclast they wouldn't renew. Shecter, a wise man, had predicted the book would be a hit and that Bouton's life would

change forever. He created big business out of vanity baseball cards and then of shredded bubblegum in a pouch like a ballplayer's chewing tobacco. Baseball, he wrote, gripped him. At age 58, he still was trying to pitch for Momma's Pizza in a league near his home in the Berkshire Mountains.

Once a TV interviewer asked this outcast player-turned-businessman if he regretted anything of his life, and he replied, "Some business deals I missed; some friends I let get away. Nothing big."

Had the book let the genie out of the bottle? "Yes," Bouton said. "You might say that."

He said he made peace with Mantle with a note when Mantle's son Billy died. The reply on Bouton's answering machine, he said, was Mangle saying thanks, "...and I'm OK with 'Ball Four,' and I want you to know I'm not the reason you're not invited..." Still, Bouton said he felt he wouldn't be invited until he "was the oldest living Yankee."

Laurie Bouton was killed in an auto accident in New Jersey in August. Her father's lingering grief prompted Michael's letter, which prompted the Yankees. When the promotions coordinator called, "I jumped," Bouton said. He called the invitation "her gift."



PHOTO BY GEORGE McNISH
Former Yankees pitcher Jim Bouton receives a warm welcome back from the crowd during his emotional return to the Stadium for Old-Timers' Day.

He said he has learned to cope by filling his house with her picture, of "seeing her when they have a party." On occasions when he doesn't want to cry, he said he lets himself cry beforehand. "You wake up in the morning, and you forget," he said. "Then you remember, and it hits you." He sighed.

"We saw the sunshine today, and we gave her credit; she set this all up," he said. "If it rains, we give her credit, too."

He noticed the pinstriped hanging next to him. "Look at this," he said. "They give you a shirt with your name. Now I'll know I was here."

He put it on, put on his cap and looked in the mirror. He liked what he saw. Sometimes, in some ways, a man is welcomed home.

