

# PRIDE OF THE PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

Baseball is, essentially, a game of history. In no other sport can athletes measure their performance with such precision against those who have come before. Every aspect of the game is recorded, from most base hits to lowest earned run average. As time passes, players' evaluations and rankings increasingly come to rest on the statistics they compiled during their careers. While nearly everything else tends to be forgotten, the statistics remain unchanged, unforgiving. Ultimately, they become the sportswriters' basis for deciding whether or not these players deserve baseball immortality. For both players and fans, immortality means induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

The game of baseball, too, engenders nostalgia and deep, personal sentiment. It has helped mend differences between generations, soothe racial and ethnic tensions, and provide stability in a rapidly changing world. Its ability to accomplish these has depended heavily on those players who respect the game and its meaning for the public, particularly the young. These are the heroes of the game, sports figures who set records of their own and who contribute to the enduring values of fair play, commitment to teamwork, and integrity of example. They remind spectators of everything that has always been good about baseball.

For nearly two decades, Philadelphians enjoyed their very own baseball immortal, Mike Schmidt. Not only did he play third base for the Phillies, Schmidt personified the Philadelphia Phillies. From 1973 through 1989, he led his team to five National League championship series and two World Series. He was selected for a dozen All-Star teams, enjoying the unique honor of being elected to the last one, in 1989, after he had retired. Among the twenty-four Phillies' career records the native midwesterner holds are most hits (2,234) and most games (2,404). Schmidt was voted the "Greatest Phillies Player Ever" in a poll of fans conducted in 1983. His uniform number, 20, was ceremoniously retired by the Philadelphia Phillies in 1990. But the accolades don't stop there.

Michael Jack Schmidt was one of baseball's premier power hitters during the 1970s and 1980s. By the close of his celebrated career—all of which he played in a Phillies uniform—he held or shared fourteen major league records and eighteen National League records. His final statistical totals place him on par with the game's greatest power hitters, immortals such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmy Foxx, and Hank Aaron. Those totals include 548 home runs (seventh best big league all-time), 1,595 RBIs (seventeenth best all-time), a .527 slugging average, and a home run ratio of one for every 15.3 at-bats (fifth best all-time). Mike Schmidt also led the National League in home runs a record eight times. Only Babe Ruth won more home run titles in one decade than the five Schmidt garnered in the eighties.

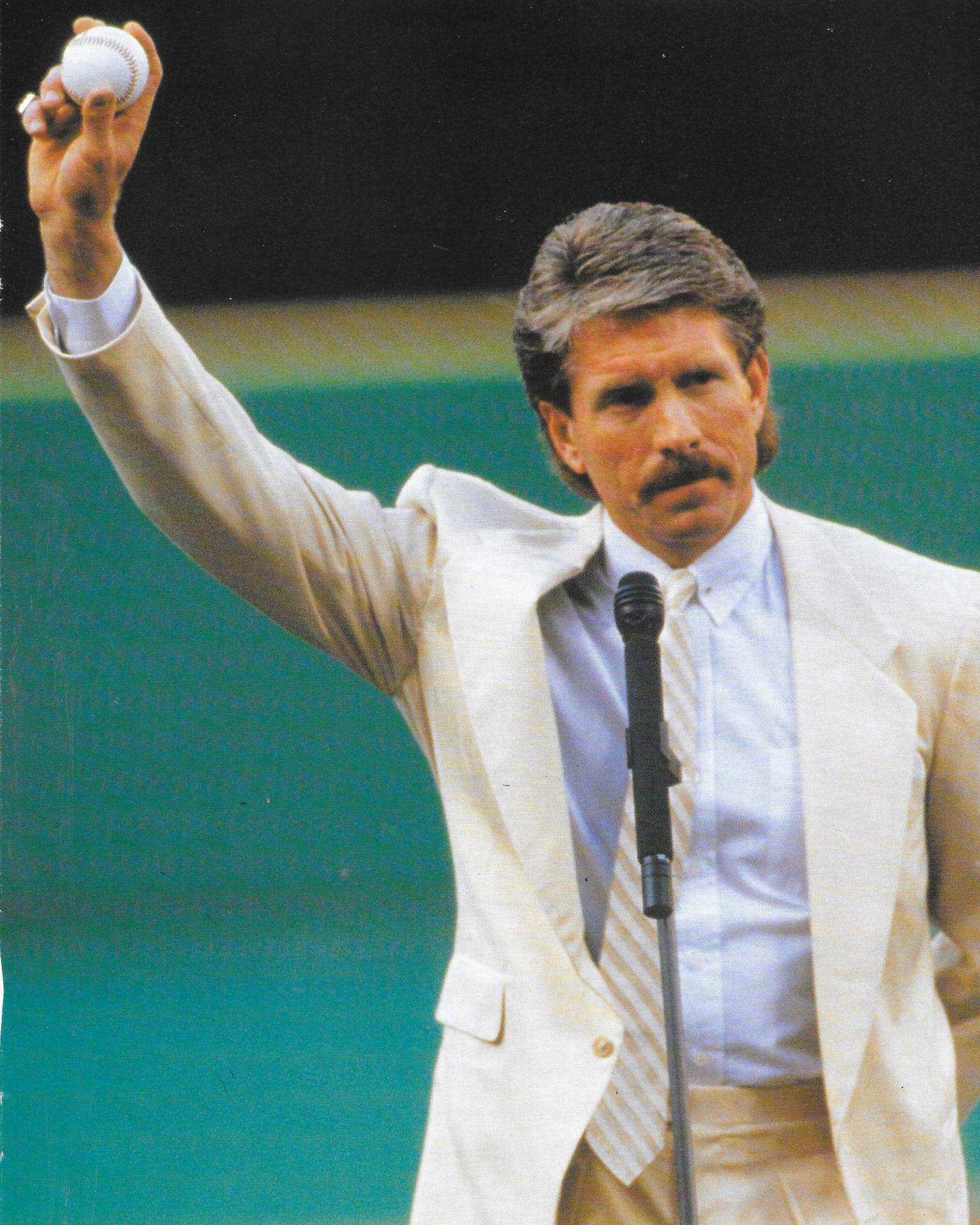
Schmidt was just as exceptional in the field where he won ten Gold Gloves, more than any other third baseman except Brooks Robinson. No other third baseman did more with both his bat and glove. Together with the Most Valuable Player Awards he won in 1980, 1981, and 1986, Schmidt's offensive and defensive production make him the best third baseman in the history of the game. It is little wonder that Thomas Boswell, one of the country's most respected sports writers, described Schmidt as "the best all-around baseball player of the last fifteen years, and the greatest third baseman of all time."

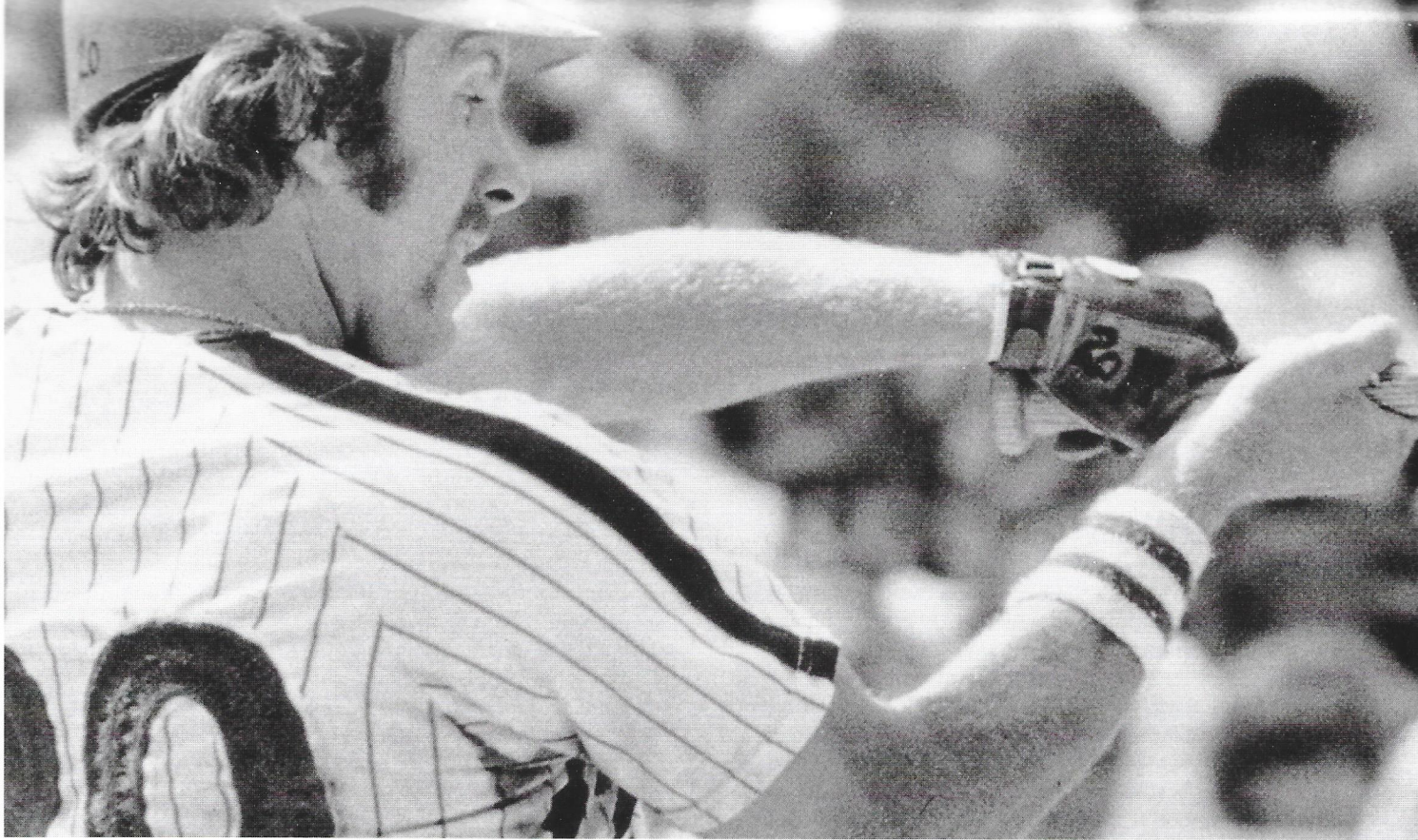
Mike Schmidt's career totals made his election to the Baseball Hall of Fame a forgone conclusion in 1995, his first year of eligibility. Yet the statistics and personal accolades are only part of his story. In an age when most athletes avoid the responsibility of serving as heroes for the young, Schmidt embraced that role wholeheartedly. While many sports superstars concentrated more on fame and fortune than on becoming goodwill ambassadors for the game, Schmidt was busy speaking out against drug addiction, sponsoring a host of charitable organizations, raising a family, and playing baseball with exceptional grace and dignity. Indeed, Michael Jack Schmidt was the consummate hero a youngster could have emulated.

## An Interview with Mike Schmidt



by William C. Kashatus III





When Schmidt retired from baseball on Monday, May 29, 1989, he did so with the style and integrity that had come to characterize his major league career of seventeen years. Stating that he had always set high standards for himself as a player and that he believed he could “no longer perform up to those standards,” Schmidt admitted, “I feel like I could ask the Phillies to make me a part-time player in order to hang around for a couple years and add to my statistical totals. However, my respect for the game, my teammates, and the fans won’t allow me to do that.” Fighting back tears, he concluded, “Some eighteen years ago, I left Dayton, Ohio, with two very bad knees and a dream to become a major league player. I thank God that the dream came true.”

Inducted to the Baseball Hall of Fame on Sunday, July 30, 1995, Mike Schmidt recently discussed that dream, as well as his personal and professional achievements both on and off the playing field.

**When you were growing up in Dayton, Ohio, could you have predicted your success as a major league baseball player?**

Without question—no. I was about the fourth or fifth best baseball player in school—a .250 hitter, and if you don’t hit .400 in high school, nobody knows you’re alive. I was always the kid with potential, but even that potential was jeopardized by a couple of major setbacks in high school. I tore up my left knee in football during my sophomore year and severely damaged my right knee the following year. Those two injuries curtailed all of the hopes I had to become a college athlete, let alone a major league baseball player. As it turned out, I went off to Ohio University with a T-square and a portfolio to study architecture, but I didn’t give up on baseball. Since I didn’t

have an athletic scholarship, I was a “walk-on” who did eventually make the team. Looking back, I think it’s ironic that had I not experienced those knee problems—which ended my football and basketball careers—I probably wouldn’t have been a baseball player.

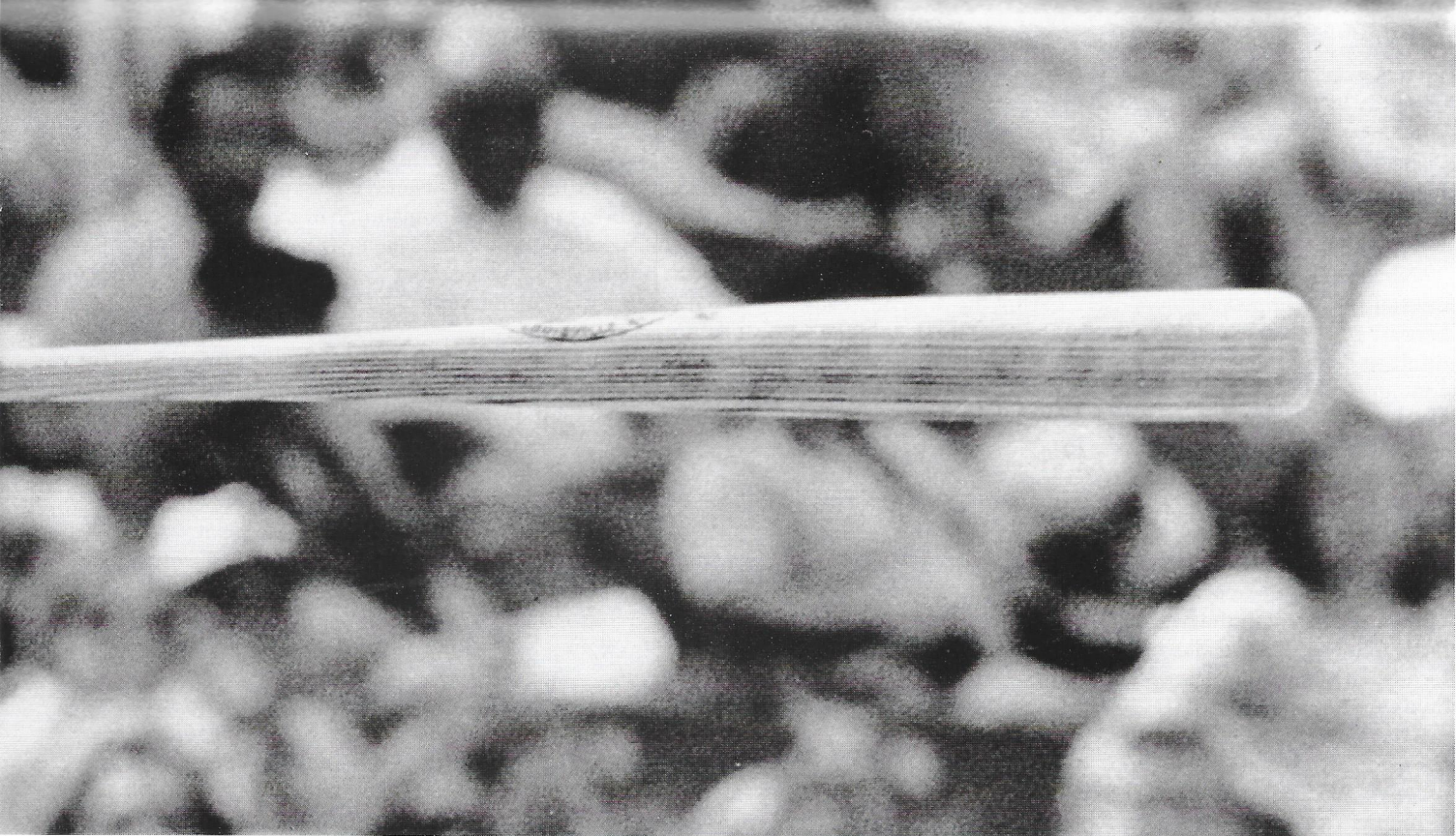
**What team did you follow as a young boy? Who were your heroes?**

Growing up in Dayton, Ohio, I followed the Cincinnati Reds who were right down the road. They were the “only game in town” so to speak, or at least the team that was televised most in that area. Therefore, as a youngster my heroes were players like Frank Robinson, Gordy Coleman, Johnny Temple, John Edwards, Jim O’Toole, and Vada Pinson. As I got closer to college, I remember seeing Pete Rose and Johnny Bench play their first major league games and they became my heroes. Ironically, I ended up playing against and/or with them during my own professional career.

**Who were the people most responsible for you making it to the major leagues? Was there one individual who influenced you after you made it to the majors?**

At the top of the list are my father and mother who were always there when I needed them. They supported me by giving me the opportunity to play and encouraging me to do my best. Of course, there were also my coaches at each stage of my personal development—Jack Fenner, my Little League coach, Dave Palsgrove, my high school baseball coach, and Bob Wren, my coach at Ohio University, probably the most influential person of all. All of these coaches supported me by giving me good instruction in the fundamentals. They motivated me





and built my confidence by telling me that I was an exceptional player and that I had a chance to be a great player. Once I made it to the majors, I'd have to say that Pete Rose had a tremendous influence on my career. He was the finest team player I had ever seen. He always had something to say to pump you up, to play harder every night. He made a major difference for myself and for the Phillies.

You have to remember that from 1976 to 1978 our team captured the National League's Eastern Division title each season, but nothing seemed to go right for us in the playoffs. I'm not sure we knew how to win as a team in the five-game, post-season series. It didn't matter if you won a hundred games during the regular season, if you couldn't win in the playoffs you were labeled a "loser." The Phillies lived with that label until Pete Rose showed up.

In 1980, Pete provided the kind of dynamic leadership that took the pressure off the other players. He was the kind of athlete who was boastful and could go out on the field and back it up. That allowed the rest of us to raise our level of play and, ultimately, go on to win the World Series that year.

**In terms of your playing abilities, you have been called a late bloomer. Some, including Tony Lucadello who scouted you in college, claim that the pattern continued into your major league career. Do you agree?**

Yes, I always have been a late bloomer. One of the reasons is

that I was young for my school age. In fact, I was nine months to a year younger than most of my peers and that pattern continued throughout my education. When I graduated from college I was twenty-one years old whereas most of my friends and fellow athletes had already turned twenty-one during their

junior year. If you advance my professional career by one year, you'll see that I enjoyed success a year later than many other athletes. For example, 1973 was my first real season in the majors and I had some difficulty adjusting to the level of play there. A year later, in 1974, I led the National League in home runs, and I was voted to the All-Star team as a write-in candidate.

The second factor that probably contributed to that label of late

bloomer—and one that is closely related to age—is experience. I began to shed some of the insecurities I had as I progressed at each level of pro ball. I stopped acting as though every trip to the plate was a life-or-death proposition. Instead of thinking I had to hit every pitch with every ounce of strength, I tried to pick out a good pitch and swing naturally. With the more relaxed attitude that came with experience, everything started to fall into place. I allowed my natural instincts to take over, to become more confident. And to be sure, a big part of my ability to succeed as a player was confidence, knowing that the people around me believed in my abilities as a professional athlete. Feeling comfortable with my surroundings enabled me to achieve that confidence and I really believe that it took me a year to create that kind of atmosphere for success.

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From 1974 to 1977 you were one of the best young players in baseball. You had captured the National League's Home Run title four times, been named to three National League All-Star squads, and compiled a fielding percentage at third base of .954 or better. In 1978, you had a sub-par season but you managed to bounce back to become the greatest third baseman ever to play the game. The three Most Valuable Player Awards you won in 1980, 1981, and 1986 attest to your remarkable consistency. What happened in 1978? How did you turn your career around?

Nineteen seventy-eight was the one year in my career that my statistics dropped off immensely. Part of the difficulty came because of an injury to a rib cage muscle. That put me on the disabled list for the first three weeks of that season. It took another two weeks for me to be able to play without pain. So it was mid-May before I could hit or field to the standards I had set for myself. Then I tried to press to make up for the lost time. But I don't view 1978 as a lost season. For instance, I had the opportunity to hit out of the lead-off spot that season instead of what had been my regular number three slot in the batting order. That experience allowed me to reconsider some of the things I was doing up at the plate.

One of the reasons for my consistency over the years was probably the flexible approach I took to hitting. I've always been a student of hitting, watching other players' styles, adopting different techniques if I think they will be more successful. When I first came into the game in the 1970s, I stood reasonably close to the plate and pulled the ball to left field. I hoped that thirty of those balls would go out of the park and that I would hit a hundred RBIs. Sure, I had some success. But I also struck out one hundred and fifty times a season and hit .250. So I decided to adopt a different style. By standing deeper in the batter's box I was able to stride into the pitch and hit the ball to all fields, much like the late Roberto Clemente of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

The change allowed me to hit for average, and yet it didn't take anything away from my power. In fact, it's pretty ironic that I battled the home run my whole career, but the home run is what I'll be remembered for. All five hundred and forty-eight were fun to hit, too—not to mention another one hundred and fifty I hit foul.

I believe that there was another, more important reason as to why I was able to turn my career around after 1978. Around that time I began asking myself why I had experienced so much success. Why was I continuing to be blessed? Why do I continue to achieve in both my personal and professional lives? Later that year, I got down on my knees and prayed to Jesus Christ to take over the reigns of my life. He has provided for me and my family ever since.

**You mentioned that you had to work at your hitting, to adopt a flexible approach at the plate in order to stay at the top of your offensive game. What about defense? Has fielding your position at third base presented the same kind of challenge?**

The defensive game came more naturally for me than the

was fun. That carried through to the professional level. I probably received the defensive notoriety for making the spectacular play, the unusual play—catching the runner coming around third when you have no other play, the bare-handed play, and the diving plays. I don't know if I did things fundamentally right, but I certainly did enjoy myself in the field.

**The 1980 season was a memorable one for both you and for the Philadelphia Phillies. That season witnessed the team's first and only World Series championship. Not only did you capture the first of your three National League Most Valuable Player awards, but you were also named the MVP of the World Series. What was the most memorable experience of that championship season for you?**

Without a doubt, the memorable experience of that season for me was the final three games of the regular season against Montreal. At that point we needed to beat them two out of three games in their own ball park to clinch the Eastern Division title. That was a tall task at the time because they had a great ball club with Gary Carter, Warren Cromarte, Andre Dawson, Steve Rogers, and Tim Lincecum. Our team realized that we needed someone to take charge and get some big hits. I was fortunate enough to step up and be that player. I hit home runs in the first two games to defeat the Expos and, as it turned out, we really didn't even need to play that third game to clinch the division. But that series was special for me because I put to rest any question about my ability to deliver when our team needed the big hit. That was the year I was finally recognized as a clutch player.

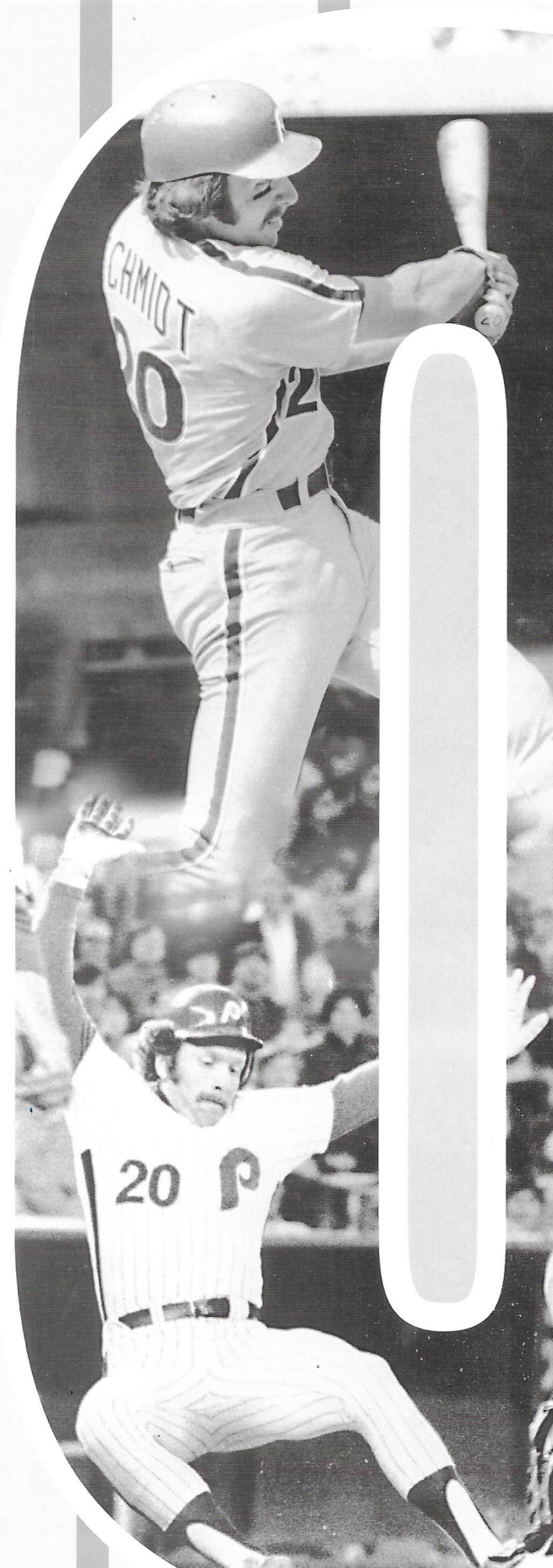
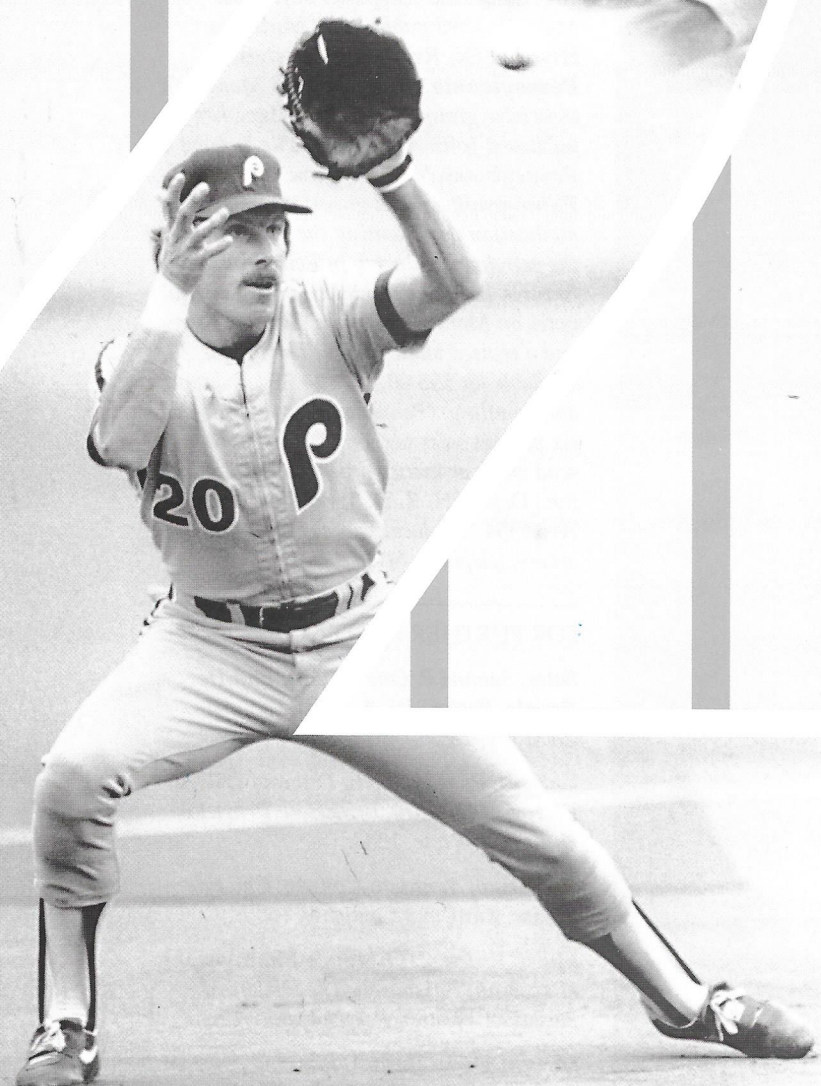
Another memorable moment that season was the final out of the World Series when [relief pitcher] Tug McGraw struck out Willie Wilson [of the Kansas City Royals] to end it. Tug and I drove to the ballpark together before that final game and I made him promise that if he was on the mound for that final out to wait for me. Both of us knew whoever was on or near that mound for the final out would probably be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Sure enough, it worked. Tug struck out Wilson and then turned to look at me at third base. Of course I came running in and jumped on him. That was another real special moment for me.

**Philadelphia and its sports fans have an infamous reputation for being exceptionally demanding. Yet you were one of the few superstars who played your entire career in Philadelphia, even when you had the opportunity to join your friend Pete Rose on a pennant contender in Cincinnati at the end of the 1988 season. Why did you choose to stay in Philadelphia?**

The overriding reason I remained a Phillie throughout my career is because the team's owners—first Ruly Carpenter and later Bill Giles—made it financially worth my while to remain in that city. I was the highest paid player in baseball for a number of years and if I wasn't the highest paid, I was easily the second or third. That was incentive enough to stay in Philadelphia. Of course, my wife's roots are also in

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As for the Philadelphia fans, sure we had our tough times over the years. It seemed I had a way of disappointing them. To this day, I wish I could have been all that Philly fans wanted me to be. They treated me very much like my father. Their expectations were high; they were very demanding and hard to please. But they also had a way of pushing me to the limit, not letting me become satisfied, always reaching for higher goals. I am especially grateful to those fans who gave me their support, rain or shine, win or lose, good times or bad times. Those are the ones who will always be a part of me.

**Over the years of your major league career, you've compiled an impressive list of accomplishments, including your recent induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame. You will go down in history as the greatest third baseman ever to play the game, but what do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments?**

That's a tough question to answer. To be sure, I was fortunate to have a nice, long list of individual accomplishments, but I believe that my greatest achievement was survival. Playing for seventeen years in the major leagues at the top of my game was my greatest accomplishment. If you ask the greatest players in the game over the years—the men who made it into the Hall of Fame—each and every one would probably mention their consistency, their ability to be one of the best players in the game for so many years. By the time I retired I might have taken one step off the pedestal, but I was still pretty close to the top of my game.

As far as the statistics are concerned, I have to admit that during my whole career I'd been concerned for my team, playing the game the way it's supposed to be played. There were many, many times I took 2-0 pitches down the middle of the plate because I was leading off the ninth inning and we were down two or three runs. I could have hit the long ball, adding more home runs, more RBIs to my statistical totals. But the situation called for me to get on base, so I looked for a walk. I've always understood that that's the way the game is supposed to be played, and that's the way I played it my entire career. The things I've accomplished statistically are a direct result of that approach.

**In an age when professional athletes discourage young fans from considering them as heroes, what do you, as a professional athlete, believe was your responsibility to young people?**

I am a Christian, and I believe that the Lord has a plan for each one of us. His plan for my life has been a wonderful plan, and I believe that my obligation for the many blessings He has given me is to live my life as an example for children. The Lord has given me wonderful things. He has allowed me to travel, to meet millions of people, and to affect many lives along the way. And if I can affect those lives in a positive way, whether it's something I say, or something I do, or something I give, or just living my life as an example, then I believe that I have lived up to my responsibility. A lot of athletes may not feel that way, but I believe that with

Christian person that responsibility is something that is joyful, something that you cherish.

**What does the future hold for you? Will you return to professional baseball in some capacity?**

At the present time, I am reaping what I consider to be the "ultimate benefit" of my success as a major league baseball player. The financial rewards have allowed me to experience some things in life that I've always dreamed about, to have a nice home in Florida, and to be able to provide my children with a fine education. I am leading a very private life now, and I'm living it day to day with the security of knowing that it will take care of itself as time goes on. Once my children are in college, then I may have the freedom to return to a life that would involve travel. To be in baseball, you must accept a life of travel—and that is something I walked away from in 1989 when I

retired. A life of travel also means that you can't always be there for the family and kids—that is my priority now. Somewhere down the road baseball will be a part of my life again. The sport has been my life. It's been everything to me. I met my wife as a result of baseball, I have a beautiful home as a result of baseball, and I have what few men can say they have. I have over fifty good, solid friendships because of baseball. For a man to be able to say that he has fifty close friends means that he has had a special life. ♣

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*William C. Kashatus III is a regular contributor to **Pennsylvania Heritage**. A teacher and coach at the William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, he has written about baseball for several publications, including the **Philadelphia Inquirer**, the **Philadelphia Daily News**, and **American History Illustrated**.*

*The author wishes to thank his boyhood hero, Mike Schmidt, for taking time out of a demanding schedule to give this interview.*

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#### FOR FURTHER READING

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