

observing sports

Every sports fan has his favorite or favorites on the different teams.

You can't always explain why you fancy one performer over another.

Sometimes you can ... as I found out yesterday when I walked into the Tiger clubhouse and peered around for the first time this spring.

In their familiar spots were Al Kaline and Jim Northrup, Mickey Stanley and Norm Cash, Mickey Lolich and Tom Timmerman.

BUT THE GUY I wanted to say hello to most was Bill Freehan. I guess it's because of all the Tigers I've known Freehan much longer than anybody else on the club.

I remember Bill before he was a sports star ... in high school ... on the Detroit sandlots ... at the University of Michigan ... and then with the Tigers in the American League.

When I first spotted him, he couldn't have been much older than eight or nine. He'd come with his parents to visit grandma and grandpa who lived across the street from me on Cheyenne in Detroit's Northwest sector.

His late grandpa knew then that Bill would make it BIG in sports.

"He's got all the tools," granddad would say. "Look how he throws the ball. Look how he handles himself for a young kid."

Naturally, one couldn't dispute grandpa. One never does. But not too many of these gents who boast about grandkids becoming major league sports stars ever calls his shot.

But Granddad Freehan knew what he was talking about.

Not too many years later, Bill Freehan was living in Florida. His parents had moved there because of a new job assignment for pop.

Word began filtering up north about Bill Freehan, the three-sport prep star in football, basketball and baseball. There were reports on how the various scouts were converging on him everytime he played ... and the college coaches, too.

CAME SUMMER, Bill Freehan came back to Michigan to play on the Detroit sandlots. He was a catcher, then as now, and all the scouts turned goo-goo eyed everytime they saw him.

When he finished high school, Bill decided to cast his fortunes first with the University of Michigan. He starred for one varsity year in football and baseball and then left to sign a big bonus contract with the Tigers.

But, I'm running ahead of the Freehan story a little. I remember umpiring sandlot games involving Bill in Detroit and I remember how he was picked to represent Detroit on the Hearst U.S. baseball stars who annually would play a game in New York.

My job in those days with the ol' Detroit Times was to accompany the selections from Detroit to New York and write about them. When I took Bill, he was an easy subject. Just about every day there were stories on how the major league scouts raved about his work and how they were ready to offer him a tremendous contract.

Bill didn't sign right after that New York game, but it wasn't too much later that he decided that he preferred to play for dollars instead of just fun.

THE REST of the Freehan story is one most baseball fans know. He wasted little time in the minor-league system of the Tigers.

They no sooner brought him up than he became their No. 1 catcher. And he has been ever since. He's been an All-Star catcher over the years, which shows what the baseball world thinks about him.

Last season was a tough one for Bill and his team. While the Tigers slumped, Freehan's long-ailing back started giving him more trouble.

It pained so much his wife often had to help him from the house to the car so that he could get to the ball park.

By September, the Tigers were out of contention. And the back pain was worsening. It was decided that Freehan should undergo surgery. The doctors told him that was the only way he could continue in baseball.

It was by no means simple surgery. When it was over, Freehan was placed in a heavy cast for several weeks. He then went into a long winter of conditioning. But he didn't know what would happen the first time he crouched behind the plate again in the Tiger camp in Lakeland, Fla.

He admits now that he was concerned. Concerned and worried.

But it was on a Friday afternoon in February, he put on the shin guards, the chest protector and the mask.

He bent down and nothing happened. There was no pain. Freehan felt like a new man.

THE BACK HASN'T bothered him anymore. And yesterday, when the new season began, Bill Freehan was at his accustomed spot behind the bat for the Tigers.

It's been a long road and more than a decade in time since those days when the blonde kid who had loads of hair then would play catch across the street on Cheyenne.

But, like his grandpa said: "Bill will be a big leaguer some day."

And, somewhere in that world to which all of us eventually must go there has to be one smiling gentleman, who looks down and watches over the Tigers and Freehan everywhere they go and everywhere they play.



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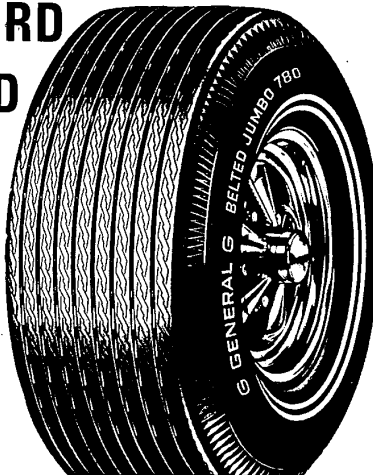
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