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# Bring In the Right-Hander!

Jerry Reuss

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BRING IN THE RIGHT-HANDER!

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# BRING IN THE RIGHT-HANDER!

*My Twenty-Two Years in the Major Leagues*

JERRY REUSS

*University of Nebraska Press  
Lincoln and London*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-  
in-Publication Data

Reuss, Jerry, 1949-  
Bring in the right-hander! :  
my twenty-two years in the  
major leagues / Jerry Reuss.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographi-  
cal references.

ISBN 978-0-8032-4897-7  
(cloth : alk. paper)—

ISBN 978-0-8032-5508-1 (pdf)

—ISBN 978-0-8032-5509-8 (epub)

—ISBN 978-0-8032-5510-4 (mobi)

1. Reuss, Jerry, 1949-
2. Baseball players—United States—Biography. I. Title.

GV865.R4243A3 2014

796.357092—dc23 [B]

2013035021

Set in Lyon by  
Laura Wellington.  
Designed by Nathan Putens.

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*To my wife, Chantal, whose encouragement helped me through the rough times and who was there to celebrate the good times, this book is dedicated to you! You are the love of my life.*

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# Prologue

Who would've guessed the momentum of the 1981 World Series would shift in the space of five pitches? Ron Guidry, the Yankees starter in Game Five, had beaten the Dodgers in his last three World Series starts against them since 1977 and was cruising through the first six innings.

I wasn't at my best, allowing four hits, three walks, and the Yankees' only run in the second inning. I also dodged a huge bullet working out of a bases-loaded jam in the top of the fourth. Then I found my groove as I retired eight of the next nine Yankees from the fifth through the seventh.

When Guidry fanned Dusty Baker to lead off the home half of the seventh, it marked fifteen of the last sixteen Dodger batters retired as Pete Guerrero stepped to the plate. I sat on the bench and thought, "Just get me a run, and I'll hold them right there." Somebody listened. Pete hammered a hanging slider into the left-field bleachers that tied the game. The crowd of more than fifty-six thousand came alive. The electricity that filled the air at Dodger Stadium the past two days was back in full force. Steve Yeager, the next Dodger batter, fell behind in the count 1-2 on a couple of nasty sliders. Then Guidry tried to sneak a fastball past the veteran catcher. The pitch caught too much of the plate, as Yeager homered to give us a 2-1 lead. Maybe I should have asked for some runs earlier.

The Yankees were retired in order in the eighth. We had Davey Lopes on first base with two outs and Ron Cey batting against reliever Rich Gossage. On a 1-1 pitch Cey was hit square on his batting helmet. Suddenly, the importance of the game paled in comparison to the status of a man's life. The crowd was quiet as we all waited to see if Cey could get up. After a few minutes, Ron was helped to the clubhouse and then taken to a local hospital for X-rays. Talk about a peak and valley of emotions.

We still led 2-1 in the top of the ninth. Everybody in the house was on their feet. Like my teammates, I was riding that wave of momentum and the excitement that was just three outs away. Bob Watson grounded to short for the first out. Lou Piniella, with an RBI (run batted in) single in the second, bounced a single up the middle. I shook my head as the ball came back to the infield. "I should have known that it wouldn't be easy," I thought. The next batter, Rick Cerrone, lined my first offering to center for the second out. Aurelio Rodriguez, standing at the plate, was all that stood between me and taking a series lead of three games to two. Rodriguez lined the first pitch just foul down the third base line for strike one. He tapped the next pitch foul at the plate for strike two. Before I delivered my next pitch, I did something for the first time during a game. While rubbing the ball I walked around the mound and scanned Dodger Stadium from left field to right, drinking in all the excitement. This was the moment I dreamed of ever since I was a kid back in Overland, Missouri. Like anybody who has ever played the game, I lived this scene in my mind many times in different schoolyards and ball fields. My next pitch would make my dream a reality.

# Acknowledgments

“Work hard . . . and play just as hard!” That was the mantra repeated by Willie Stargell regarding his baseball career as well as his life away from the game. For me, I was living my baseball life by this code long before we were teammates on the Pirates. In fact, as you read this book, you may think that I played much more than I worked. That was hardly the case. With all the workouts in gyms lifting free weights, sweating through the various Nautilus programs, jogging miles around the National League (NL) ballparks, and conditioning on a Versa-Climber later in my career, I did the work behind the scenes as well as the countless hours spent on the field. The “play” part of the equation presented an equilibrium that allowed me to play in twenty-two Major League seasons.

Of course, no player makes it to the big leagues much less plays as long as I did without the help of a huge supporting cast. The following groups and individuals were instrumental in creating the proper learning environment, while teaching, coaching, directing, or helping me on my life’s path. My heartfelt thanks to the priests, nuns, and lay teachers at All Souls School in Overland, Missouri; the moms and dads who served as Little League coaches and chauffeurs; the administrators, teachers, and coaches at Overland’s Ritenour High School (a special tip of the cap to baseball coaches Lee Engert and Pete Hensel); Thoman-Boothe, American Legion Post 338,

including the veterans (thank you for your service), administrators, and coaches; the front-office personnel of Major and Minor League teams, including owners, general managers (GMs), scouts, managers, coaches, trainers, and clubhouse attendants; my teammates over the years, whom I credit for the wins as I take the blame for the losses; my parents, Melvin and Viola, who were there when I played my first Little League game and followed my career to my final professional game; my brothers, Jim, who introduced me to the game in the backyard, and John, who played in many of the neighborhood games while we were growing up; my children, Shawn, Jason, and Brittany, who experienced the middle and later parts of my career that included long stretches away from home; and my wife, Chantal, who was there for moral support through all of the good times, the bad times, and the times in between.

Special thanks are given to the number of people who helped with this book. There were a number of former players and teammates who gave me their time and recollections of many of the events mentioned in this book. They are Norm Miller, Jimmy Wynn, Larry Dierker, Steve Blass, Jim Rooker, Kurt Bevacqua, Bruce Kison, Phil Garner, Jim Fregosi, Steve Garvey, Jay Johnstone, Bill Madlock, Rick Monday, Wally Moon, Steve Rodgers, and Carl Erskine.

Many thanks to those employed by the Pittsburgh Pirates: director of baseball communications Jim Trdinich, team photographer Dave Arroyo, and the liaison for alumni affairs, Sally O'Leary.

Former and current members of the Los Angeles Dodgers front office were kind enough to provide guidance and their professional expertise: Peter O'Malley, Fred Claire, Toby Zwickel, Steve Brenner, Chad Gunderson, and Mark Langill.

Many thanks to David Smith of retrosheet.org, whose website and answers to my personal requests provided many of the dates, places, and people that are included in this book; Jim Gates of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, who filled in many of the blanks with information on long-forgotten facts about my career; the people

at [baseball-reference.com](http://baseball-reference.com) for their stats and information regarding my early years in the Minor Leagues; John L. Smith, columnist for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* and an author of numerous Las Vegas—related books for advice and direction; author of many books on baseball Doug Feldman for his thoughts on promotion and minute details of the St. Louis Cardinals; the Major League Baseball Players Association, especially the late Marvin Miller, Donald Fehr, Dick Moss, the late Mark Belanger, and all of the players who served as player representatives over the years; and Jack Sands and Joe Barinelli of Sports Advisors Group, who took care of the business side of baseball.

So, it's time now to grab a chair, kick back, and enjoy my life in baseball!



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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Early Years

It was my older brother, Jim (six years my senior), who took me out to the backyard to play ball that first time. Jim, being right-handed, was surprised that I batted and threw left-handed. There wasn't a problem with me using his bat (other than it was too big for a five- or six-year-old), but it was awkward using his glove to catch. Once Dad saw how I loved to play, he picked up a glove for me to use. When Jim started hanging with his high school buddies, I enlisted other kids in the neighborhood to play ball games in the backyard, the schoolyard, and the lot on Lackland Avenue between a church and Ortmann's Funeral Home. Today, a Walgreen's drugstore occupies the spot where the church and the lot once stood.

Because Jim was playing Little League at Overland's Legion Park, I wanted to play. Once I was old enough, I tried out for a team and didn't make the cut. As there were so many other kids my age who wanted to play, other teams were added, and I played my first year of Little League. I was a first baseman in those early years and pitched only because the coaches insisted. Because I was bigger than most of the other kids and could throw harder, I experienced early success as a pitcher. My dreams were to be a Major League Baseball (MLB) player. I once expressed that opinion to Jim. He told me, "That's a big dream. Do you know that the odds are one in a million of making it?" Jim made good grades in high school, so I

figured he must know something. But I shot back at him, “Maybe so, but I’ll be that one!” That’s cocky for a second or third grader, but I knew what I wanted. And I wasn’t about to let anybody or anything stand in the way of my dreams.

It might have been 1955 or 1956 when I attended my first Major League game. My two brothers (Jim and my younger brother by two years, John) and I jumped in the car with Dad on a picture-perfect early-summer afternoon. It took less than a half hour to get a few blocks from Sportsman’s Park (renamed Busch Stadium in 1953) and maybe another half hour driving around the neighborhood, as street parking was at a premium.

We were on foot only a few blocks from the entrance on the third base side, and as we approached I could sense the electricity of activity surrounding the park. People rushed from all directions to the ballpark entrance. We turned our walk up a notch as we got in step with the rest of the crowd. We slowed down once we found our place in line, as Dad had the tickets in hand and we passed through the turnstiles.

All my senses were on high alert. The entry level was cool but humid, much like our basement. The pungent smell of cleaner couldn’t wash away years of stale cigars and beer that was past its prime. There was the sight and sound of a nearby vendor, dressed in his red-and-white-striped jacket and straw hat, yelling, “Scorecards . . . get your scorecards here! Can’t tell the players without a scorecard. Just a dime.” It took all of just a few seconds to part with some of my allowance to buy my first souvenir scorecard. My next purchase happened just seconds later, when I had to shell out for a pencil. That took care of that week’s allowance. It was a rookie mistake that never happened again.

Before we trekked to our seats, there was a bathroom stop. No way Dad was getting up from his seat once the game began. While waiting for one of my brothers to finish, we stood outside the men’s room just a few feet from the concession stand. There were new

smells and the sounds of fresh popcorn popping and hot dogs sizzling on the grill. Even though I was feeling the effects of a full stomach after Mom's breakfast that could have fed the neighborhood, it was there and then that I realized hot dogs at the ballpark always tasted better than those we ate at home.

Once all zippers were up, we walked up the ramp that took us to the "promised land" on the concourse level. As Dad showed the usher our ticket stubs, I gazed upon a sight that would be forever burned into my mind. Looking beyond the overlap of the upper deck, I saw the bluest sky ever, stopped only by the dark-green pavilion roof shading the right-field seats. Draped with a screen that ran from the right-field foul pole at the 310-foot mark to the 354-foot mark in right-center field and affixed at the bottom to the top of the right-field wall, the pavilion was the area that Harry Caray talked about when Stan Musial lofted a fly ball in that direction. "There's a drive . . . deep to right . . . It might be outta here . . . It could be . . . It is, a home run!" Harry said as the noise from the crowd in the background rose to a crescendo while we listened to his account on our radios. Now I was seeing it for the first time.

Directly in front of the wall was the warning track that bordered the outfield wall and the fence in front of the first row of seats around the perimeter of the playing field. On the other side of the track was the greenest grass I'd ever seen, with no bare spots or weeds!

We found our seats behind the Cardinals' third base dugout as I watched the spectacle in front of me in total amazement. It was batting practice (BP). Some players were hitting, others were fielding grounders, and the rest of the players were in the outfield, chasing fly balls. There was action on the field no matter where you looked.

Looking above the left-field wall, I saw the Budweiser scoreboard. Though basic by today's standard, that hand-operated scoreboard gave fans the current pitchers and the inning-by-inning score in games around the Major Leagues.

After the teams finished their infield practice, a group of men in work uniforms like the one Dad wore came on to the field, carrying rakes and a long hose. The grounds crew swept, raked, and watered everything, including the dirt!

The Cardinals took the field as the nearly full house stood and applauded. The noise stopped only when the organist played the national anthem. I took those moments to view the Cardinal players (Ken Boyer at third was the player closest to our seats) in their home whites, navy blue hats, and the red Cardinal logo on the front of their uniform that played perfectly against the green grass, the tan color of the dirt, the dark green of the right-field seats, and the bluest of skies.

If I had to pinpoint the exact moment I fell in love with the game of baseball, that was probably it. Coming to the ballpark as a fan was one thing. That wasn't enough for me. I wanted to be a ballplayer. I wanted to play on this field. I wanted to do it forever. Within a few years, that wish was granted.

Little League all-star teams from all over the St. Louis area descended on Busch Stadium on July 9, 1960, for a chance to play on these hallowed grounds. My Overland team made the pilgrimage to play three innings in one of the four games occurring simultaneously in the outfield grass at 1:00 p.m. When I found out our game was played in right field, I immediately envisioned blasting a homer on the roof. In my mind, I heard Harry, "It might be outta here . . . !" All I could manage was a single to left in my only at bat. But I had the thrill and memory of a lifetime.

### **Be True to Your School**

Toward the end of my freshman year at Ritenour Junior High, in 1964, the gym teachers announced that the junior varsity (JV) baseball team was holding tryouts. There may have been six or seven of us from Ritenour Jr. that walked the mile or so to the high school field, toting our equipment for the big day. At one time or

another, each of us played with or against each other in the local ABC league, which was the only Little League in our area. Once dressed, we met JV coach Pete Hensel on the field. After a brief meeting, he told us to get loose and take our positions with the sophomores already on the field. Being a lefty, there were only five positions on the field that I could play. Each of those positions was occupied with someone from ABC who played that position better than I did, with the exception of pitcher. I knew then that the only way I would make this team would be as a pitcher, especially as I could throw a curve better than I could hit one. My career as a pitcher was born that very minute.

### **Doing the Bunny Hop**

I don't remember much about my performance during my freshman year. I know that it was good enough to impress John "Bunny" Ailworth, the head coach for the local American Legion team, Thoman-Boothe Post 338. Bunny watched many of our high school games because Thoman-Boothe drew their players from Ritenour. He knew me before I attended high school, as he coached Jim, while I was always around the park for the games.

When our season was over I tried out for the team, and to my surprise and the chagrin of my upperclassmen, I made it. No doubt, Bunny, a former Minor League player, caught some hell from some parents for the choice, but he had his reasons for choosing a raw fourteen-year-old. He pulled me aside and told me why I made the team: "You have a real chance for a baseball career."

Bunny watched over me that year. He made me sit near him in the dugout as he kept a running dialogue of the game. "Watch how he pitches this guy," he would tell me. Or, "What pitch would you throw in this situation?"

Bunny also included me on trips with his coaches and other players to scout our Legion opponents. Usually, I sat with the pitching coach, Harry Gurley, or one of the other players behind home plate,

as I learned how to find a hitter's weakness or read his base-running tendencies.

Bunny was right about the invaluable experience. Playing against players four or five years older worked in my favor when basketball season rolled around during my sophomore year. I was called up to the varsity early in the season and started the rest of the games that year. This was a big deal, as Ritenour played deep into the state tournament the previous year. At just fifteen, I was playing with the big boys and holding my own.

### **More Than a Game**

Our JV baseball team was a good one. Not only did the freshmen play in the ABC league, but we also competed in the same league against our sophomore teammates. By the time we freshmen were juniors, we won the 1966 Missouri State Baseball Championship. For good measure, Ritenour repeated as state champions in 1967, our senior year.

I don't remember many individual games, but I do remember how fundamentally sound we were as a high school team. The varsity coach, Lee Engert, was a stickler for practicing fundamentals. He coached in a classic manner. First he "chalked" the drill by writing it on a chalkboard, "talked" us through our individual responsibilities, and "walked" us through every aspect as the play was practiced. More important than the play on the field was his approach regarding the proper attitude to play the game. Preparation and execution in gamelike conditions were the order every day. Of course, he had his rules, which included a curfew, no drinking, and maintaining grades. Attitude for Coach Engert was more about responsibility as an athlete, a student, and a man. He made sure that his ideals were followed. He checked grades and talked with other teachers about his players. He made it a point to know their families. If there was a problem away from school, he was there for any of his players when it counted. In many cases, he was the

father figure in the lives of many of his players when there was no one else around. The lessons we learned from Coach Engert were larger than the game of baseball.

After games I pitched, Lee would rub analgesic balm on my left arm and shoulder. Years later, I learned that ice applied to the elbow and shoulder would help recovery much quicker. But the conversations that centered on the game, the strategy he used, the key plays we made or didn't make, and how we would focus on them during our next practice were all building blocks that helped me during my years as a player and later as a coach and broadcaster. It turned out to be much more important than a bag of ice. To this day, whenever I get a whiff of that balm used in training rooms everywhere, I still think of those high school moments.

At the end of every practice, pitchers at Ritenour ran the hill beyond right field. Back in the '60s, I estimated the angle to be between thirty to forty-five degrees and the distance around sixty yards. (It's been graded a bit more level since then.) We ran up the hill and jogged down backward. After five or six of these sprints, we were gassed. Gradually, running the hill became a personal challenge. I hated running up and down the hill, but I wouldn't allow it to beat me. Six sprints became eight, then ten, then twelve. I ran the hill every day I didn't pitch. Sometimes, it caused me to miss a ride home. Once after a game on a miserable, cold, and rainy spring day, I was running my sprints when my buddies drove by. I looked over as one of them mooned me from the passing car. I could hear them laughing as they sped off. "That's okay," I laughed. "One day, you'll watch me pitch in the big leagues."

### **Watching the Pros**

I attended a number of ball games at Busch Stadium (now referred to as Busch Stadium 1) over the years. Most of the time I sat behind the Cardinals' dugout, but I ventured out to the bleachers once or twice. When the Cardinals moved to Busch Stadium 2 downtown



in May 1966, I still preferred to sit in the reserved section above the third base dugout. At the new ballpark the Cardinals moved from the third base dugout to the first base side. That was fine by me. I could look into the Cardinals' dugout and watch my favorite players, observing how professionals handled themselves at the best as well as the worst of times.

Now sixteen and seventeen, my friends and I were old enough to drive. The Cardinals instituted Teen Night, a Friday-night promotion that featured reserved-seat tickets for five dollars. That meant after our high school game, we changed, stopped home for a quick bite, picked up our dates, and headed to the ballpark. Sitting in our reserved seats along the third base line (where else?), we watched the Cardinals as we listened to the latest hits by local favorites Bob Kuban and the In-Men, between innings, as they were perched on the concourse near the foul pole in right field. Imagine . . . the Cardinals, Kuban, and my best girl on a warm Friday night. It didn't get any better than that! Or did it?

### **My Baseball Cards Came to Life**

In July 1966, the visiting Atlanta Braves invited me to throw in the bullpen before a game against the Cardinals. By this time I'd become an accomplished high school pitcher and was drawing attention from scouts in the St. Louis area. I remember meeting the Atlanta scout in front of the double glass doors at Busch Stadium 2, the players' entrance. We made our way down the steps to the visitors' clubhouse and waited for the equipment manager to get me a uniform. There I was, just seventeen years old, staring at faces of players that I had seen only on baseball cards, only this time they were in various stages of preparation for that night's game. "This should fit," the man told me as he handed me a Major League uniform. "Go around the corner and take one of the open lockers there," he said. The scout said he'd meet me in the dugout.

There I was, with my high school gym bag, which carried my

shoes, glove, jock, and sweatshirt, as I walked into a Major League clubhouse for the first time. I tried to act as if I belonged. That was a tough act to pull off when my knees were knocking. There was only one open locker on the back side of the visitors' clubhouse. It was near the end of a row, between two lockers that were occupied by players' equipment. Because nobody was there, I dressed quickly and quietly and made my way to the field. I was seventeen, in a Braves uniform, as I walked down the ramp to the visitors' dugout, prepared for a tryout in Busch Stadium. I wasn't nervous . . . I was petrified!

I was ready in no time and cut loose with everything I had for a brief ten- or fifteen-minute session. Apparently, they liked what they saw, as they nodded when I threw a pitch. "Jerry, thanks for coming here to throw for us. We wish you the best, and we'll keep in touch," the scout said. I took a minute or two as I sat on the bench in the visitors' dugout and watched the Cardinals on the field. I recognized all of them. I had their baseball cards at home. On that day I dressed in a Major League uniform and walked on the same field they did.

Back in the clubhouse I found the equipment manager, reading a newspaper. "Where should I put my uniform?" I asked. He looked up and said, "Throw it in the basket in the middle of the floor." He went back to his newspaper. When I got to the locker, I saw the street clothes of the players who occupied the lockers on both sides of me. Both players were elsewhere.

Because I was in no hurry, I looked inside the locker to my left. There was the uniform top with the number 44 on it. My mouth dropped. I had a locker next to Hank Aaron! By the time I caught my breath, someone sat down on the stool in front of the locker to my right. I turned to see who it was and immediately recognized Eddie Matthews. In his shorts and sweatshirt, he grabbed his paperback and started reading. Not wanting to bother a future Hall of Famer, I got undressed, grabbed a towel, and headed for

the shower. I hoped by the time I returned I could regain some composure and say hello.

Both Aaron and Matthews were at their respective lockers when I returned. Eddie was engrossed in his book, *Beau Geste*, the movie version playing at the local theaters. I was finally able to speak, so I asked him, “How’s the book?” I thought, “That’s a nice icebreaker.” Without looking up, he said, “Horseshit!” Well, that’s a word I never heard until that moment. If nothing else came from this tryout, I had added to my ever-increasing vocabulary. I didn’t know how powerful this word was until I played professionally. This was one of those “magic words” that could get a player tossed from a game. Shout it loud enough in an umpire’s direction, and it’ll get you an early shower and probably a fifty-dollar fine.

“What brings you here, young man?” the voice to my left asked. I introduced myself and told Hank Aaron about the workout as I got dressed. After a few minutes he said with a smile, “I wish you all the best and good luck.” I answered, “Mr. Aaron, thank you. I wish you the best as well.” We didn’t know then how our paths would cross in the future.

“Were you the kid warming up in the bullpen a little while ago?” asked Eddie Matthews, who closed his book and placed it in his locker to my right. I turned and answered, “Yes, sir, that was me,” I said quietly. “I heard you were really bringing it,” he said, looking me in the eye with a smile on his face. “Thank you” was all I could manage. I wanted to ask him why he was still reading a book if it was horseshit, but thought better of it.

As I gathered my gear and put it in my gym bag, I thanked both of them, wished them the best, and walked out of the clubhouse and back to reality. Years later, I met both Hank and Eddie on several occasions. I reminded them once that we met in St. Louis that July day. I can understand why they didn’t remember. Me . . . I never forgot.

There’s a postscript to this story. Whenever I played in St. Louis

as a visiting player, I was always assigned one of those three lockers. On my last road trip as a player in 1990 with the Pirates, I dressed in that same middle locker. I thought about that first visit then, but haven't told the story until now.

### **College Scholarship or Professional Baseball?**

- *June 6, 1967: Drafted by the Cardinals in the second round of the amateur draft*

Sometime during my junior year at Ritenour, Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, paying the bills. She stopped me as I entered the kitchen and said, "Sit down." She began in a businesslike tone. "Dad and I looked at our savings and realized that it won't be possible for us to send both you and John to college." She continued, "Even with Jim working, it cost us more than we budgeted. For both you and John to attend college, one of you will have to get a scholarship." She looked me straight in the eye and said, "You have the grades and athletic ability. I'm depending on you to make it happen." Because my focus throughout high school was to get a college scholarship or sign a baseball contract, this was something that had already crossed my mind. What surprised me was Mom's straightforward talk. Most of the time her approach to anything was to test the waters and ease into what was on her mind. This time, she just dove in. "Mom, it's already in the works," I told her.

Since the start of my sophomore year, I had received letters from different schools around the Midwest, inquiring about my college plans, with full-ride commitments from both Southern Illinois University and the University of Missouri coming during my senior year. During the spring of 1967 both Mom and Dad breathed a bit easier when I committed to SIU to play both baseball and basketball.

I was working at Boyd's in nearby Northwest Plaza, selling men's clothes, when Mom called me at work that day in early-June 1967 and told me that the Cardinals had drafted me. I was surprised it was the hometown Cardinals because their scouts had stayed in

the background. George Silvey, the Cardinals' scouting and farm director, lived about a mile away from us, and his son, Tim, was a high school teammate. Maybe the Cardinals had decided a low-key approach best suited their interests when it came time to draft and sign me. For me, it was the first step toward a career as a Major League Baseball player.