

GEORGE KELL

A: Warren Spahn was about as good a pitcher as you'll ever face.

Q: He was crafty, wasn't he?

A: He didn't throw as hard as a lot of pitchers. His curve wasn't as great as a lot of pitchers, but he threw it exactly where he wanted it. If he wanted to throw a curve on the outside corner, he would put it there and like you said on a three-one count he knew what he was going to do and where it was going and the batter didn't!

And you'd be pretty much guessing. He's not guessing. Do you know Warren never won a game in the major leagues until he was 25 or 26 years old?

Q: yes

A: And then he won 300 and how many?

Q: 360 something?

A: Yeah. I think it was the most amazing feat.

Q: Well, it truly is, and what 6 consecutive 20-game years?

A: yeah.

I know it. Well, when he was I looked it up one time. He's a hero of mine. I'm telling you the guy did what he did, but when he was 41 or 42 years old he won 20; now that's amazing. That's amazing. He needs to be pitching in the major leagues when he was 42 years old. Golly. I was with him at a card show in New York about three months ago and he was there and it was a Saturday and a Sunday show and he signed on Saturday and I signed on Sunday. I mean there was three or four each day, four, maybe five each day, but he had signed on Saturday and he came down in the room where we were all waiting to go out and start signing. Say we started at 12:00 and signed until 3:00 and he was going to go to the airport and he stopped by the room and I thought he was signing with us and he said no I'm through. I'm going home and I said back to Oklahoma and he said just as fast as I can go!

Q: He was ready to go home.

A: Yes, just like I was, but we sat there and listened to him talk and he intrigues me. I'm telling you. The man has been there. He's done it. And he doesn't brag about it. He's just been there and he's done it. And I like that. I'm a lot older than Brooks is, but I visit with Brooks. Of course, we both do because in my opening remarks at the Hall of Fame I said it is almost unbelievable, inconceivable that two boys would grow up 90 miles apart, same church, same background, same foundation from the family, and wind up in Cooperstown on the same day. That's just the way I feel about Warren Spahn too! They've done it and yet they don't go around with a badge on their chest and bragging to everybody. I get so put out with some of these modern ball players. I really, I'm not biased in any way, but the Hall of Fame ball players I'm telling you... you almost have to drag it out of them. I've been there with Yogi, who was one of the great ones and my wife loves Yogi Berra. He sits in the lobby and talks to everybody, signs autographs with everybody. You never know that the guy played in more World Series games than anybody in the world ever played. When we watch that show "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire" and one night one of the questions for \$2,000 "who played the most games ever World Series games", Mickey Mantle, Joe Dimaggio or Yogi Berra, and I said Yogi and my wife said no.

A: She thought Mickey, of course, but when we married, six years ago, she didn't know a baseball from a football, but boy she's learned. And I said Carolyn, I'm going to give you one more chance, She studied a minute and she said Yogi's older than Mickey Mantle, isn't he? And I said yeah, three or four years older and she said he came to the major leagues four or five years before Mickey, and I said yeah, She said I'll say Yogi Berra. I SAID I'LL SAY YOUR RIGHT!! She figured it out and she said I know that Dimaggio quit early because I had told her that Dimaggio had quit in 1951 and I was still playing and Yogi came up in 1947 and the Yankees won the Pennant in 1947 and then five in a row, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, and 1953. And then they missed 1954 and then they got four or five more in a row, and I said and Mantle didn't come up until 1951, so he missed those first five. That's where Yogi got more. Whoever it was was just agonizing over the question and they couldn't get it and it was for \$32,000. I was hollering -- Yogi, -- YOGI, -- Yogi!

Q: And he needed one of those life lines to win?

A: He used a life line and I said call me and he called somebody and they said Berra and he said why do you say Berra and he said I was going to say Mantle and he said because Berra came up five or six years before Mantle did and they played about the same length of time and he said okay I'll take Yogi and that's the way it turned out because Yogi was up for longer than Mantle and there was a time when the Yankees were winning Pennants not a couple times in a row but five times in a row, twice they won five in a row and that's 10 out of 11 or 12 years.

Q: And Yogi was there for all of those?

A: He was there for all of them, and he caught every game! He wasn't no part-time player, but you wouldn't know it!

Q: Like you would say he would walk into the lobby there or whatever...

A: If he lived here he would sit in this lobby half of the time and just talk to people and just enjoys people. The biggest memorabilia collector in the world. We kid him in the Hall of Fame he asked me he's asked me so many times to sign. He'll have six baseballs and he'll get everybody to sign them and finally he asked me one day, he said would you go up to the room with me and sign these. I don't want to carry them down there, to the lobby.... They're razzing me so much, and I went up to the room and he had a dozen of my pictures he had gotten somewhere and a dozen balls he wanted me to sign—but he wasn't about to take them down to the lobby and get the razzing those ballplayers are capable of!

Q: He wanted them signed, but he didn't want to bring them down?

A: I said you rascal if I ever ever... ever... send you a ball or a bat you sign it or I'll kill you. He said send me anything you want, I owe you!!!!

Ole Yogi, He's a nice guy. When Bill Dickey died, And Bill was a good friend, a real good friend of Yogi's because he was coach with the Yankees for the last few years when Yogi was just coming up! They had him to work with Yogi, until where he got to be just about as good if not as good as Rodriguez in Texas and that's as good as you can get, you know! We were in California at a golf tournament, a benefit golf tournament for Don Drysdale the year he died ....American Airlines had gone on strike while we were out there and Bill Dickey's wife called me and she said Bill died and I want you and Yogi to come be pallbearers and I told her "I don't think we can get out of here." I told her "I'd walk to Arkansas to be a pallbearer", and so would Yogi and I went down and told Yogi and he said "golly, George, we gotta go" and I said "well we got

to go is right but how are we going to get out of here and the funeral was going to be the next day."

Q: Where was that going to be?

A: In Little Rock. And we were in Los Angeles. We couldn't get out. American was not flying and everything else was booked solid and in fact, my wife and I had to stay an extra couple days, Carolyn and I, that was the first year we was married in 1994 and we had to stay a couple of extra days and then they got us on a flight on another airport that was about 40 miles from the John Wayne Airport, that we were leaving from which was close to the hotel and I didn't know how to get there so we rented a car and I was driving and we just barely got there in time and it wasn't American Airlines. They put us on Continental. I ran up to the counter, you know, and flopped those American Airlines tickets down and they said we got your reservation and got everything set but you got to go down to American counter and they've got to certify this and I don't know what all they had to do and I told my wife I said you take the bags and check them in and I mean it was a long way down to the American counter and they certified them and everything and I ran back down and we got on that plane and got home. I really wanted to be a pallbearer at Bill Dickey's funeral service. I used to go by and see him a lot and the last month he lived he didn't know anybody, so I quit going, but before that he really enjoyed people, he knew they had come by to see him, Bill and I had been friends for years and years.

Q: He was a great catcher, wasn't he?

A: "GREAT"! He's a great hitter too. Over a 300 lifetime hitter. He played every game. He was like Yogi. They had a back-up catcher, Ralph Houk, but he didn't catch 10 games a year, old Yogi played em' all, Houk told him "You need to break a leg- so I can make some money! Ha ha

A: Bill and Yogi just liked to play, they'd play every game!!

Q: How big of a fellow was Bill Dickey?

A: He was about 6'2" or 6'3", lanky.

Q: Not heavy, not stocky.

A: Not heavy, but strong. He wasn't stocky but he was lanky. He was more of the Gary Cooper type or something like that.

Q: Good arm?

A: Good arm. Good left-handed hitter, and I think a lifetime average around 313. I would have to look it up, but it's right in that range. Boy, he played on some great Yankee teams, too. I know they won the World Series in '36, '37, '38, and '39. They did not win in '40 because Detroit did and then they won '41, '42, and '43, and he played on all seven of those. I think he came up about '29 and He played until '42 or '43. Then he managed a short time.

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### George and the Family

I've always had a close family connection. My father and mother lived in (town). They moved there two years before I was born so, they moved about 1918, My Dad liked baseball and he wanted to put together a team—he knew of a good ball player, that was

a barber and to get him to move over - he helped him get set up in business, we won lots of games and had a lot of fun!

And that was always home for me. All my life. I was born there, raised there, lived there every day of my life and buried my parents there, at the church that I'm going to be buried in.

Q: I was going to ask you about your brother. Now I think I know this from something I read. He had the nickname of Skeeter?

#### BASEBALL

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. He played just one year?

A: Yeah.

Q: Is that right?

A: He played one full year and half of another in the major leagues.

Q: Is he in Arkansas?

A: He lives in Conway.

Q: What did he do? He was obviously a young man, I guess, when he played, I think I read '52, was it?

A: '51 and '52, I believe. I believe that was the years or '52 and '53, right in there. You can look it up. He came up and played the whole year and then he came back the next year and they sent him back to the minors then they called him back then they sent him back to the minors this time to Havana, Cuba which was in the International League and he said no. I told him many times that if it would have been me I would have gone. I would have been a baseball bum. I would have gone back to the minors. But he said no. I ain't gonna make it. I'm not going to make big money or full time so he got out of it and he's been a very successful business man. ...

Q: You saw a lot of talent go through not only when you was playing but all through those years, how would you, he decided he wasn't going to go to Havana. From the baseball perspective he saw his talent and ability. Did he make the right decision or do you think he may have...

A: Oh, I think he made the right decision. He played second base and played second base good, but he's small. I'm small, but he's smaller than I was, but Nellie Fox was smaller than I was, too. He was an outstanding second baseman, but Skeeter didn't hit that well and Carolyn (George's wife), said why didn't you teach him and I said you can't teach someone to hit. I know there was a story when I played in Baltimore, Paul Richard, somebody interviewed me about a story and Paul Richard's name came up in the story, and Paul was one of the smartest men that was ever around baseball and I said take Paul Richard, for example, he's the most brilliant manager I know, but he couldn't hit enough to play regular in the big leagues so if he's that smart you would think he could teach himself to hit, but he didn't. He didn't like what I said. I said well, is it about right? I said I'm not smart enough to be the manager you are, but I was smart enough to figure out how to hit and it's something you're born with, but you've still got to work on it.

Q: It's work, I'm sure.

A: Yeah.

Q: Do you think you're born with the hand-eye coordination that's a little above norm?

A: Yeah. You're born with it. I have no doubt about it. I have no doubt about when I was 15 years old and 16 in Swifton, they had what they called a town team and everybody had them back in those days. I played shortstop for the junior team and the senior team in a tournament in Jonesboro for about 25 towns around there. I was selected Most Valuable Player on the junior team and in the same tournament played of a morning, juniors, and of the afternoon, seniors. I led both of them in hitting and everything. I always was able to hit. I don't know how. I have no idea. I didn't have any training. My Dad didn't take me out and say here's the way you hit. I just worked and I worked and I worked until I got to the point where I knew well, I wrote a book two years ago, and in the book I quoted a story that going to spring training every year we used to drive and Tuscaloosa, Alabama was about halfway and there was a big hotel there and we would stop there and stay all night and I went down to breakfast one morning and Johnny Sain was there and Red Schoendienst and Stan Musial and myself and I sat down with them. We were talking and I had hit 300 a couple years by then and was really getting on my feet. Stan made the comment while we was sitting there that He had "reached the point in his career, when going to spring training that he would hit somewhere between 330-350" and I think "my gosh ain't that something that you reach that point in your career"! Two years later, I had hit 300 four times in a row and I had reached the point where I knew when I went to spring training I was going to hit somewhere between 310-340. I knew I was.

Q: You had that confidence?

A: Yes. I knew how to hit 300. I can't tell you right now how I did it, except I moved up on the plate and I hit out of the zone and people say well, "what's a zone?" Well, if you're standing on top of that plate you picture a plate something like this, a square box, right in here or wherever you want the ball. And that's your zone. Now if they hit that outside corner three times, well, you're whipped, but you gotta stay in your zone! You know a pitcher is going to make a mistake and when he does you better jump all over him, for the pitcher can't throw the ball where he wants it all the time.

Q: You can teach the concept of the zone. You can teach the concept of being more comfortable, but it still comes down to some God-given ability to be able to put that round ball on that round ball.

A: Ted Williams always said "when that pitcher throws your pitch, the one you're looking for, you don't take it, you don't miss it, you don't foul it off.. You hit it and you hit it hard;. He said a lot of guys go up there and they get the pitch they want and they swing and they miss it or they foul it off or they freeze. He said that's not hitting. When you get your pitch, you've got to hit it. Williams, Dimaggio, Musial. I would name all of the great hitters that I've played with. They go to bat four times and they hit the ball hard three times. I don't mean they have three hits every time, but they hit the ball hard three times and that gives you a much better chance than the guy that pops it up three times or hits a weak ground ball.

Q: There's tons of things I would like to know about your career, but one thing that you've said twice now, but I want to pursue. \$45,000 a year in 1951?

A: 1950. I led the lead in '49.

Q: Yeah, and you got your pay raise?

A: In 1948, I was making \$35,000 and I led the lead and I got a raise in 1935 to \$45,000 and in '39 I led the lead and then '50 I remember they offered me \$40,000 and I don't why I argued with him because in those days you had to take what they gave you. You had no rights of any kind. Mr. Billy Evans, who was the general manager, and I said Mr. Evans, I should be the highest paid in-fielder in the American League. I hit 300 every year I've been here in Detroit, and I've made the All-Star team every year and he said okay I won't argue that. He said who's making more than \$45,000, that's what I'm going to pay you. I said

"Rizzuto was making \$50,000 and I think I ought to make more than him because he doesn't hit 300 every year" although he played with the Yankees and they were winning the pennant. He finally said

"I will give you, I will make you the highest paid infielder in the American League. If he's making \$50,000, I'll give you \$50,500. That fair enough:?"

Evans called me back in two or three days late and he said "Rizzuto is making \$45,000. I called the Yankees and that's what they told me"! I said I made a deal Mr. Evans and if that's what Rizzuto makes that is fine with me, But Rizzuto had told me he was making \$50,000..... I asked Rizzuto in spring training that year "Hey what'ya say you were making? \$50,000"? and Rizzuto told me "Ah, I was just putting you on, Kell!" He said " \$50,000 sounded like a good figure" and I said " you REALLY got me in trouble, bozo!"-----

That was in '48 and then Mr. Evans said " you better go out and have a big year next year or he said we're going to have to cut your pay because you're making too much" He said we'll pay you a lot of money and I came back the next year and hit 340, drove in 100 runs and hit 56 doubles, which nobody has hit 56 doubles until this past year. IT WAS THE Most doubles that has been hit in either league since '37 and I led all the voting for the All-Star team in both leagues More than anybody in either league. The Headlines read "Kell leads all major leagues and Jackie Robinson is second in the voting for the All-Star game in 1950.

It was quite an honor. I had more votes than anybody in the major league. I beat Robinson out of about 100,000 votes, and he had also led the lead in 1949 in the National League.

Q: In batting average?

A: In batting average. I only beat him out by one point. He hit 342 and I hit 343. That had nothing to do with the voting. It was just the best of our positions, and it wasn't close. I had something like a million and a half votes and the next third baseman in the American League got something like 300,000 votes, so you know, you put together four or five years getting over 300 and making the All-Star team every year, you're going to get the vote. They vote by name. Like I told somebody I should have made the All-Star team in '46, but I hadn't ever hit 300 in the big leagues, and I made it the last two years I played, and I shouldn't have made it. There were young third basemen that was just coming up that was better than I was.

Q: I see what you're saying though. But they weren't on there. They weren't on the ballot.

A: They didn't know their name, but they knew my name, and it's still happening today. I see guys that make the All-Star team that were great three or four years ago and there's young ball players come along better than they are today, and they'll make it next year and next year. It's a name recognition once you establish yourself.

Q: Did you mean that you made that \$45,500 from that year on?

A: Yeah.

Q: Even though you hit 300 several more times.

A: I hit 300 several more times. It was a lot of money.

Q: Players weren't getting paid any more than that though, were they?

A: No. We had one player in Detroit made more money than I did. I look back now and we had a half dozen good ball players that were making \$30,000. That's all they were making.

Q: What names come to mind first of those making more than you were making?

A: Hal Newhouser. He had won 29 games one year and 27 the next and was most valuable player in the league two years in a row.

Q: Yeah. I remember that.

A: A great pitcher. I remember I dressed right on one side of Hal and Mack was on the other side. He said something about we was talking one day and he opened a letter from Mr. Evans, who was general manager, and said you're gonna have to cut back on your extracurricular activities and making appearances for money and traveling because we're already paying you \$75,000 a year and you don't need to be making all these extracurricular things. He put the letter back in the locker and Mack said he don't make \$75,000. Mack just reached up there and got that letter and that's what it said, \$75,000. He said Lord of mercy I thought they was overpaying you. He knew what I was making. Mack was a good ball player. He was making \$31 or \$32,000. Just in those days you took what they give you or you didn't argue with them.

Q: You didn't feel like, as you indicated earlier, that was not something you thought you did well though was negotiate.

A: No, I didn't.

Q: You did, evidently, one time.

A: I didn't feel comfortable with that. I did it twice. I did it once with Mr. Mack, and he was so good to me I don't know how I had the nerve to argue with him. The first year I played for him he gave me \$3,000 and I hit 268. Then the next year he paid me \$5,500 and I hit 272 and then in '46 when I went to spring training or going he sent me a contract of \$6,500 and I called him and I said you gave me a \$1,000 bonus at the end of the season because you said I played hard and I got out all my ability and I was going to get better and I said I think I'm entitled to \$8,500 and he said well Mr. Kell, that's what he called everybody Mr. He said you come on to spring training and we'll sit down and talk about it. I said well I just think I deserve \$8,500 and he said well I do too, but that's a lot of money, and he finally said you come one down here and he said I'll tell you what if you have a good year and like you've been doing and play hard I'll give you \$8,500 at the end of the year I'll see you get it. Well, he traded me to Detroit about a month and a half after the season was over and I walked up there to the front office and to sign my contract that day they traded for me and George McCosky was the general manager then and he said George what's your salary in that contract. I said Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ I'm

*Cam Bell*

making \$6,500, but Mr. Mack said I would get \$8,500 at the end of the year if I had a good year and played hard he said back it up for \$8,500 he told the girl, the secretary, he said you've already had a good year. If you hadn't I wouldn't be trading for you. So he gave me \$8,500 then at the end of the season I hit 322. He gave me a \$2,500 bonus. So that's how I got started. Then they come back the next year in '47 and I hit 320 and drove in 93 runs and I made the All-Star team and they said how much money do you want and I don't remember exactly but \$17,-\$18,000 and he gave it to me and at the end of the year gave me another \$2,500 so that's how I got up there to \$45,000. I was up to \$35,000 before I led the league in hitting. It was easy to jump up to \$45,000.

Q: So from that point on do you feel like say from '51-'55 you were still the...

A: I was, but I could tell that the I was 30 years old then and felt like I was making good money, and everybody had been good to me, and I wasn't going to make a big issue out of it. They were still giving me, I know Detroit still gave me \$2,500 at the end of the year. I made the All-Stars then and I hit 300, so I wasn't going to quibble with them over any more money, because they had been too good to me.

Q: I understand. You didn't really have a lot of exposure. You called Mr. Mack. Beyond that beyond those first years when he brought you up out of \_\_\_\_\_, you said, did you have much exposure to him after that?

A: No.

Q: What was your opinion of him as an individual?

A: I had a lot of exposure to him when my brother, Skeeter, was only about 18. He came to Detroit to work out with the Tigers, and he had been to college one year and my dad said he can sign a major league contract with Detroit or whoever but they're going to have to put him through college. That's his bonus. I want to see him through college. So he was working out with the Tigers, and Mr. Mack was in town with Philadelphia. This was '47 or '48. I don't know exactly what year. Mr. Mack called me over to the \_\_\_\_\_ and he said is that your brother out there, and I said yeah. He said I like the way he plays. He said is the Tigers gonna sign him. I said I don't think so. He's been here for a week or two and they haven't offered him a contract. He said what does he want to sign. I said he doesn't want anything but my daddy said whoever signed was going to have to send him through college and he'll go in the off season. Just play ball and go to college. Might take him five years. He said I'll do it, I'll do it. I'll sign him right now. He said I took a chance one Kell that turned out and so he signed him that day with the provision that I'll pay your tuition and your way through college and he got his degree and everything else in the off season.

Q: Boy, that's pretty insightful of your father though, too.

A: Yeah. He wanted him to go to school. Of course, he wanted me to go to school, too. I went one year and then I got into professional baseball and I promised him I would go back to college and I never got back to college.

Q: Oh, you never went back?

A: No. I just got caught up in playing baseball and I signed when I was 17 and when I was 20 I was playing for Mr. Mack at the end of the season. It just happened fast.

Q: So you had high regard for Connie Mack?

A: Oh, yes. Yes. He's a most respected man I've ever known. He never uttered an oath in his life. He never got on a ball player. He would get on you in a nice way. Now, Mr. Kell, what were you thinking? What were you thinking when you did that? Now, Mr. Newson, who was 40 years old and pitching for us and I remember he jumped on one of



the outfielders one time because they let the ball get away from them in the outfield and he was eating him up and Mr. Mack went down and told him that's enough, stop it, and Mr. Mack said well horse feathers. That's the nearest I've ever come to hear him issuing an oath of any kind. He was a genuine joy. The year that he gave me \$1,000 at the end of the '45 season was about two weeks to go in the season and his son, Earl, was a coach and he just told me one day in an offhand way he said daddy really likes the way you play and you play every day and you play hard and he said he was going to give you \$1,000 bonus at the end of the year, but boy, now, \$1,000 in 1945 was a lot of money to somebody that didn't have any money and was making \$5,000 a year. When the season was over I stayed around Philadelphia two or three days and nobody ever said anything about \$1,000 bonus so I called Mr. Mack and I said well can I come up and see you and he said sure. So I went to his office and in the old ball park they had a high tower and his office was up in that tower and he said have a seat and sit down. He was just as nice to me and my daddy. He said what can I do for you. I said well Earl, that was his son, said that you were going to give me \$1,000 bonus at the end of the season, and I really appreciate that, but I haven't gotten it. He said Earl said that. I don't remember. I said well maybe I'm wrong, but that's what Earl said. He picked up the phone and called Earl who had an office there. He said Earl would you come down here and he came in and he said Earl, Mr. Kell said that you told him I promised him \$1,000 bonus at the end of the season. Did I tell you that? He said, yes, dad, you did. You told me you was going to give him \$1,000 and I told him. He said well you go with Earl and we'll go down and get you \$1,000 check and we did. It was just as simple as that.

Q: Isn't that great though?

A: Of course, he was 85 and he probably didn't remember it and if I hadn't said anything about it I never would have got it.

Q: Never would have got it.

A: But that's a lot of money to me and I just thought well he's forgotten it and I'm going to remind him.

Q: And he was 85 years old then?

A: Yeah, well 84 or 85.

Q: He spent his whole life in baseball, didn't he?

A: Yeah.

Q: You know, again, that's another one that while I've read, and in fact, I came across several years ago, 10-12 years ago, I was able to buy a baseball with his autograph on it. It had maybe one other, no, it had several others. I had Eddie Collins and it had several of them. I have since given it to a friend and it's supposed to be somewhere here in Little Rock in a display somewhere. I've never known where that was at.

A: I've got one baseball and he signed it, but it is so old, and his writing was not the best. His M's looked like a W and his Conn looked like Coww and but I treasure it.

Q: Is it in pretty good shape then?

A: No. It's not in good shape. It's old and I don't know. I just found it one day...