

Dickie Thon

SABR Oral History Collection

Interview by John McMurray
Transcribed by Daulton Zeaman
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Q: This is John McMurray of the Society for American Baseball Research, and I'm speaking today with Dickie Thon for a SABR oral history. Dickie played fifteen seasons in the major leagues for six teams, most notably with the Houston Astros beginning in 1979 and extending through 1993. We are recording this interview with Dickie's permission on February 28, 2024. Dickie, I wanted to start out by asking what got you interested in baseball?

A: Well, you know, I came from a family that my grandfather played professional baseball in Puerto Rico from 1940 to 1950. In those days they didn't let Black players play in the (United) States, so they came and played in Puerto Rico. It was a very tough, a very good league. So that's why I started. I was interested because I used to go to summertime camps and I used to go when I was like 5 years old and I saw those professional baseball players. And I always wanted to be one of them. So I started very, very young.

Q: You were born in South Bend, Indiana. Your dad, Freddy, was playing baseball at Notre Dame. Arm problems got in the way of his career, and it was only after that that you wound up moving to Puerto Rico. Is that correct?

A: Yes, my father was going to Notre Dame, and when he finished college, we went back to Puerto Rico. I think I was like a month or two months old. So, you know, I was born there, but I really grew up in Puerto Rico.

Q: And you mentioned your grandfather who was a pitcher.

A: Yeah, he was a pitcher and then he became an outfielder in the Puerto Rico Winter League. He was a very good player.

Q: He was on the verge of getting signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers and he turned down a contract from the Dodgers. Is that true?

A: Yes, that's true. That's what I understand. And in those days, he was working in Puerto Rico in the Navy and he was playing ball too. So he was making a good living in Puerto Rico and I believe that the amount of money they offer was a lot less than the amount he was making in Puerto Rico. So he didn't go.

Q: Can you tell us how important baseball was at that time to the culture of Puerto Rico?

A: Yes, very important. Basically everybody would either watch or listen on the radio. Plus it was very good players playing in Puerto Rico. Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Willard Brown, Monte Irvin, (Sam) Hairston, a bunch of very good players. But I understand it was a very tough league. And the fans used to go crazy. You know, every game was full and it was very important for Puerto Rico fans.

Q: Who are the players that you particularly admired growing up?

A: Usually Monte Irvin was one of them, and then (Roberto) Clemente came along. Clemente and (Orlando) Cepeda, they were my favorite players.

Q: And you had the chance to meet Monte Irvin when you were quite young.

A: Oh yes, and he used to come and visit my grandfather in Puerto Rico. ... I remember I met him and he was very big, (with) big arms. He was a very well built guy and I was impressed because he was a big guy. But a very nice guy.

Q: At what point during your formative years did you start playing shortstop?

A: I always played shortstop. When I was a kid, I was very quick. And every league that I played, I played shortstop. I sometimes played second (base), but the position I really loved was shortstop.

Q: And at what point did you start thinking you might have the chance to make it to the major leagues?

A: I think I was a senior in a high school because I played all sports. I played basketball, I played volleyball, track. We didn't have football in Puerto Rico. ... But when I was a senior in high school, I realized I had the ability to play professionally and I dedicated myself to become a professional baseball player.

Q: You also played in the Puerto Rican Winter League during your high school years. Tell us about that experience and how much it meant in terms of developing your skills.

A: Well, a lot. I signed in 1975. I signed in Puerto Rico professionally before I signed with the (California) Angels. And I remember going to the practice with the Bayamón Vaqueros, and they had a great team there. You know, we had (John) Candelaria, we had Ken Griffey Sr., we had Art Howe, (Darrell) Evans, we had a bunch of very good (players). And being around those guys helped me a lot with my career.

Q: You were signed by the California Angels as an amateur free agent in 1975. Do you remember the name of the scout who signed you?

A: Yes, Red (Ray) Smith.

Q: And how did it all happen? Who approached you? When did this take off?

A: Well, I was playing in like a semipro league, not pro because I didn't get paid. But they called it AA in Puerto Rico and one of the bird dogs (scouts), I was playing against his team. And he's the one who approached me with Red to be signed by the Angels. And that's why I signed. Because he was the one who encouraged me to sign with the Angels.

Q: In 1976 you went to the Class A Quad Cities team in Davenport, Iowa. What was it like getting to the minor leagues?

A: It was a great experience. I was very lucky that I had Joe Maddon as a roommate. He was my roommate two years in a row. I was a young guy, but he really took care of me and he helped me a lot. And, you know, the same thing with Carney Lansford, Floyd Rayford. We had a great team, very good players on that team.

Q: Joe Maddon obviously became a very successful major league manager. What was he like at that stage of his career?

A: You know, he was a little older than me. He signed out of college. And what I remember (is), he was a very good catcher, very smart. Not a bad hitter. But you know, he was older than most of the guys. But I noticed that he was very structured, very intelligent. I didn't know he was going to be that good of a manager, but he was a very smart guy.

Q: In 1977, you were with Class A Salinas and Triple-A Salt Lake City. At this stage of your career, when you're in the minor leagues, were you considered a better hitter or were you considered a better fielder?

A: You know, I had a coach named Bob Clear for many years with the Angels when I started, and he always told me to play the complete game. You know, be a good defensive player, be a good baserunner, be a good hitter. Hit with power sometimes. Hit with men on base, you know, get the run in. So he got on me to be a complete player and I considered myself to be both sides, a good defender and good hitter.

Q: Were you thinking at this time that you were getting close to being ready for the major leagues? You were getting a lot of praise as an infielder. You were considered in many cases the (Angels') best prospect. What were you thinking at the time?

A: Well, you know, I was thinking to get better. (In) my second year with the organization, I had a very good year with Salt Lake City and Salinas. I hit with power, I hit a lot of RBIs, a good baserunner. So I felt that I was getting closer. But you know, the Angels at that time, they had a lot of older players: (Bert) Campaneris was there, Freddie Patek. So it was a little tough for me to get started and playing regularly.

Q: And it wasn't a situation where a rookie comes up and just goes right into the lineup. At that time, it was a different dynamic. Right?

A: Yeah, it was different. Remember, in 1979 we made it to the playoffs against the Baltimore Orioles. I hit .339 (in 35 games) in the big leagues, and I didn't have a chance to play regularly. It was very tough to play. I felt that I was ready to play. But you know, we had all the very good players, so it was a little tough to just to get started as a regular player.

Q: Your last stop in the minor leagues was in Salt Lake City, and then you were called up to the Angels. You made your debut May 22, 1979, and you replaced Bobby Grich at second base. What do you remember most about that first game?

A: Well, I was very excited, very nervous. I remember we were playing for a pennant. So it was a lot of pressure to do the job. I was playing with very good players. Rod Carew, Bobby Grich, Campaneris, Patek, Carney Lansford, Don Baylor. So I felt like I had to be ready to help. And, the little I played, I felt that I did my job.

Q: What do you remember about your first at-bat or your first hit during your first at-bat against Rich Hinton (of the White Sox on May 27, 1979)?

A: I remember I was very nervous. But what helped me a lot was that a lot of those guys I faced in winter ball and played with very good players, so I didn't feel that intimidated. I felt that I belonged there, and I felt good to be in the big leagues.

Q: And you had good initial success. You're filling in when Bobby Grich got hurt, when Bert Campaneris got hurt. (Angels manager) Jim Fregosi was impressed by your early progress. What was it like playing for Fregosi?

A: He was a very old-school manager. He took care of the older players, and I had to pay my dues to be able to play regularly. But he was very fair. I thought he gave me a chance. Whenever I played, I tried to do the best because we were playing for the pennant.

Q: You mentioned Rod Carew a little earlier. I know he had a great influence upon your career. He was a veteran player by that time. Tell us about your relationship and how did he impact your career?

A: Well, he really helped me a lot to give me a positive feeling that you have to feel that you belong when you play in the big leagues. He was a very disciplined player. I never saw Rod Carew throw a bat or a helmet. He was a very disciplined player, and I learned a lot about being in the big leagues with him.

Q: In terms of your own progress, you went back to Salt Lake City in 1980 and then you came back to the major leagues and you had a 5-for-5 game in your first game back. What do you remember about that?

A: Yeah. I was hitting .398 or something like that in AAA. I was hitting the ball very well. I thought I was going to get a chance to play regularly, but it was tough. I didn't play regularly. At

the end, I played more late in the season. But it was tough to get in because Fregosi believed a lot in the older players and I had to pay my dues, so I paid my dues.

Q: But it also can be very hard to play some and then not play for a while, and sort of keep your mental attitude together. Was that difficult for you?

A: Yeah. In the beginning it was very difficult because I didn't play every day. I played like every five days. Maybe if somebody got hurt, I played. So it was tough. In the big leagues, I was feeling very good when they called me up from AAA, but I needed to play more. But at the same time, I learned a lot.

Q: And you also were a teammate of Nolan Ryan. Tell us about him both on field and off.

A: Nolan was a very intimidating pitcher. And when you played behind him, you really wanted to do the job because if you didn't do the job, he would look at you and he would let you know. But Nolan was a very fair guy outside the game. He was a very nice guy, a good teammate. He didn't get on anybody when you were making a mistake, but expected that you give your best, and that's why I learned from him. I played for three different teams with him, and it was an honor to play with that kind of pitcher.

Q: The Angels obviously were a strong team, lots of veteran presence. And you had to have a sense at that point that maybe there wasn't going to be a full-time role for you there. Were you getting a sense that maybe the Angels, with all of the talent that they had, maybe just didn't have an opening?

A: Yes, I felt it. And then they signed Rick Burleson (who) was a great shortstop. He was a free agent for Boston when they traded him. I felt that I was going to be out of there soon because I needed to play soon. In 1981, I got traded.

Q: You were traded in April 1981 to the Houston Astros, and the Angels got starting pitcher Ken Forsch, and they needed another pitcher at the time. How did you feel about the trade?

A: I felt good because I wanted to play regularly, but when I got to Houston, they had a guy named Craig Reynolds. He went to a couple All-Star Games. He was a very consistent regular season player, and it was hard for me to play regularly because (Astros manager) Bill Viridon liked Craig. He was a very steady player. So it took a couple of years for me to start playing regularly.

Q: And of course, you had to learn new pitchers because the two leagues didn't play each other at that time. Were there any obvious difference to you, besides the pitcher hitting, in going to the National League versus the American League?

A: No, not really. I felt that both leagues were very talented. So I was trying to be more consistent as a player at the time, and I tried to do that just to be able to play regularly. Houston had a very good team too. It was tough to break in and play regularly.

Q: Now when you were playing in Houston and splitting time with Craig Reynolds, you hit particularly well at home, and you hit particularly well against left-handed pitching. What was the reason in both cases?

A: Well, I was facing more lefties with Bill Virdon because Craig was a lefty. So that's why I was seeing more left-handed pitchers, and that really helped me, because I felt comfortable and I hit very well in the Astrodome.

Q: And of course the Astros were a good team. They won the second-half title of the National League West during that strike-shortened season (in 1981). That had to have been really unusual, playing in that situation, where you had the first half of the season but you didn't know when the strike occurred that that would be the cutoff point for the playoffs. And then you have a big break in the middle, and then you come back.

A: Yeah, I remember I went back to Puerto Rico. I was lucky enough that I could work out here in Puerto Rico a lot. And when I got back, I was ready and I hit very well in the second half. And then that really helped me to play more regularly with the team.

Q: You had a lot of hot hitting streaks during that season. What was the reason? When you get on a streak like that, is it something where you have any kind of understanding of why something happens the way it does?

A: No, I think it was the chance and the opportunity to play more regularly. And that really helps a player. To play every five days, it's very tough in the big leagues. And I was a young player, so it really helped me when I played consecutive days, and I had some good days. But for me to be able to play, I had to play good because Craig was a very good player.

Q: And then of course, you have the division series where the Astros played the Dodgers. What do you recall about that series?

A: Well, I remember that we won the first two games, and I think we needed to win one more to continue playing. We lost three in a row, and the Dodgers became world champions that year. We had a good chance to make it to the World Series, but we didn't make it.

Q: That was a formidable Dodgers team, a lot of veteran talent. When you're facing the Dodgers, a team that went on to win the World Series, what do you remember about that Dodgers team and in particular the players? Obviously Fernando Valenzuela is around that time as well and making quite an impact.

A: Oh yeah, they had very good pitchers. Their starting pitching was very good, (Jerry) Reuss, Valenzuela, (Burt) Hooton, (Bob) Welch. They had very good players, very good hitters. It was a complete team. It was a tough team to beat.

Q: And you're facing all of those very talented veteran pitchers. How did it work at that particular time? Were you pretty much deciding your approach to hitting when a pitcher comes

up or are you getting an extensive scouting report on pitchers? You're only in your first few years and you're seeing some of these pitchers inconsistently. Who is telling you your hitting strategies? Or are you doing it yourself?

A: Well, I did it myself. In those days, they didn't give you that much information. Sometimes (outfielder) José Cruz would let me know what the guys threw, but at the same time, I had a lot of confidence. Because I was playing in Puerto Rico facing very good pitching, and I felt that I was able to hit well against very good pitching. So that's what I did.

Q: You also had good speed, and stolen bases were in fashion at the time as well. In terms of stealing bases, is that something you learn or is it something you just have that natural skill?

A: Well, I learned in the minor leagues because I remember I was one of the top runners in the organization, and my coaches encouraged me to develop that part of the game, and I did. When I went to the big leagues, I think the first year I had 37 stolen bases. And I had a lefty behind me with José Cruz. He didn't like for me to steal that much because he wanted to hit that hole between first and second (base). So I could have stolen a lot more, but you know, that was part of the game. José let me know that when I was at first base, he wanted to hit that hole. So sometimes I didn't steal, but I could have stolen maybe 50 bases and 20 homers. Not too many shortstops will do that. But at the time, I didn't think about that.

Q: In 1982, you replaced Craig Reynolds at shortstop, and having that opportunity to play every day really paid dividends. You led the National League in triples. You were in the top ten in stolen bases and also had a very high fielding percentage. Describe for us what that 1982 season was and how you got so comfortable so quickly.

A: That's the year that really helped me establish myself as a regular shortstop. I think that in those days they didn't use that much WAR (Wins Above Replacement) percentage, but I had a very good one. I played good defense, good hitting, good baserunning, So I feel that I was in the top of the shortstops in the league.

Q: Your confidence was quite high, and you were defensively discussed often with Ozzie Smith. And so that is quite a compliment.

A: Oh yeah. I met Ozzie when I was in my first year or my second year as a professional. I went to the Instructional League in Arizona, and Ozzie was there. I always had a good friendship with him and he was a great player.

Q: And you had mentioned before, Jim Fregosi sort of being an old-school manager. Tell us more about Bill Virdon and his strategy for managing the team. He gave the outward impression of being quite a quiet guy, a long-time baseball man. What was it like to play for him?

A: He was similar to Fregosi, very old school. I remember one time I went to his office because I wanted to play more regularly. And he didn't take it too well because I was a young guy, and he

told me to get out of the office. I would play whenever he felt that I was good for the team. So he was a tough guy.

Q: You also played with Phil Garner, who was a member of the 1979 Pirates world championship team. He was the second baseman. What was your relationship like with Garner?

A: Very good. He really helped me a lot too because he let me know to relax. "You belong here" and "Do your job." And he was a great player for us in Houston. He had great years, very steady, played hard, very good with men on base. He was a great player to play with.

Q: And you had some really extraordinary pitchers on that Astros team as well. Joe Niekro led the 1982 team with 17 wins. And then you had Nolan Ryan and Don Sutton. That had to have been one of the best things for an infielder to have that kind of quality pitching on the field.

A: Yeah, and very good relievers. And you know what? The Astrodome was a ballpark that was better suited for pitching because it was so big and it was tough to see the ball because it was a big, big field. So I really think the pitchers had an advantage and we also had one that got hurt, J.R. Richard. We had very good pitching.

Q: Tell us your recollections of J.R. Richard, because he was quite an extraordinary pitcher.

A: I remember that when he was trying to come back from that injury, we used to face him. He was out of control, and it was tough to hit him because the ball was going everywhere. But I remember he was a very good pitcher.

Q: You were playing outdoors with the California Angels (but indoors with the Astros.) From an infielder's perspective, you sometimes see ballplayers lose the ball in the roof. What was your experience playing in the Astrodome? And did you enjoy it more playing indoors or outdoors?

A: No, I liked it more outdoors, but I had to get used to indoors. I remember Cheo (José Cruz) told me when they hit a fly ball, don't take your eyes off the ball because you will lose it. So you have to know how to play in that ballpark. Plus, the field was very quick too because of the AstroTurf, so I had to make an adjustment. But it was a good place to play.

Q: In terms of your own power numbers, you were not a home run hitter although you did have 20 home runs in 1983. But by and large you were not a home run hitter. You think of shortstops today, and they often generate an awful lot of power. I guess it speaks to the question of how was shortstop different back when you were playing?

A: When I was coming up, the thing about the shortstop was that you had to be a good defensive player. And if you were a hitter, it was a plus. So most of the shortstops when I came up were not that great of hitters. They were very good defensive players. But I think I could have hit more homers because at the beginning I was the leadoff hitter, and as a leadoff hitter, your job is to get on base. So I was trying to do that. The year I had 20, I was hitting third. And that really helped

me because they were challenging me more because I had José Cruz behind me. So that's why I hit more homers.

Q: Now that 1983 season with Houston really was your most outstanding season, both offensively and defensively. You had over 600 at-bats. You were seventh in the league in hits with 177, but you also ranked first in shortstop assists and second in double plays turned and hit over .300 month after month. What do you remember about that 1983 season? And what was the biggest difference going from '82 where you were successful to '83 where you were even more successful?

A: I think I was getting more mature as a player. Understanding the game more, the pitchers, how they were facing me and being able to play more games. I was playing in Puerto Rico, and I was playing against very good players — Tony Gwynn, Rickey Henderson, Cal Ripken — and I saw that those players were playing very well in the States. So I said it's not that much different. I really got a lot of confidence playing that year.

Q: And for a player who hit 71 career home runs, you had three games where you had two home runs in that season alone. What happened?

A: Yeah, I was feeling good. I was getting stronger, too, as a player. When I first started, I was a lot skinnier. I was getting stronger. And I remember playing, I worked very hard in the winter, playing in Puerto Rico and it really helped me for that year.

Q: And you made the All-Star team in 1983. That game was played at Comiskey Park, and you were able to get into the game, which sometimes didn't happen. You were a pinch hitter and pinch hit for (Astros pitcher) Bill Dawley. At that point, it was the fifth inning, and you're facing Rick Honeycutt. Ozzie Smith had singled to open the top of the fifth inning, and then you came to bat. What do you remember about it?

A: Well, I remember that Rick was a very crafty pitcher. I knew I had to stay with him because if you over-swing, you were going to be out. But I remember why he gave me a chance to play. Usually, you know, young players with Ozzie playing shortstop, you didn't get that much of a chance. But he gave me three at-bats that day, and I was very grateful that he gave me that chance.

Q: And you got a single to center field that got Smith to second, and ultimately, following your at-bat, Steve Sax wound up getting another single and you got to second base. It had to have been an extraordinary thrill just to be on that field, wasn't it?

A: Oh yeah, it was something else. I saw Willie Mays. I saw (Orlando) Cepeda. I saw a lot of very good players, and to me, that was a dream being on the same field. And when I got to first base, Rod Carew was at first base, so it was a great experience.

Q: Did you get to talk to Orlando Cepeda during that game? And Willie Mays?

A: Oh yeah, before the game. And to me, it was a thrill. I knew about Willie because he played in Puerto Rico. And I knew how good of a player he was. And to me, being on the same field was something else.

Q: What was Willie Mays like personally?

A: He was talking to everybody, very nice to everybody. You know, he was very colorful. Cepeda was the same way. They're good guys.

Q: Now at that point in your career, things were going extremely well for you. Was Houston becoming a home?

A: Oh yeah. By that time, Houston was home. You know, I had two kids born, and one was born in Houston at the time. Later, all my kids were born in Houston. Houston is still my home. So you know, I became a Houstonian.

Q: That 1983 season, you were seventh in the league in the Most Valuable Player award voting. What did that mean to you?

A: Yeah, a lot. You know, I was playing with very good players, but playing against (Dale) Murphy and (Mike) Schmidt and (Andre) Dawson, they were very good players, and to be mentioned around them, it was great. You know, it was a great accomplishment.

Q: In terms of players that you admired, were there others that you looked around the league and tried to model your game after as a major leaguer?

A: No, not really. I was trying to be myself and play the way I was taught to play. I didn't really look to be like Rickey Henderson or Cal Ripken. I tried to play the way I could play.

Q: You mentioned Rod Carew having a great influence on you when you were with California. Was there any player with the Astros who really was a good mentor?

A: Oh yeah, José Cruz. José was a very good mentor. Very underrated player, very good player. To me, one of the best in the league as a hitter. I learned a lot playing with José. I played, I think, seven years with him, and he was good. It was great.

Q: In 1984, your season got off to a very good start. You batted .375 during the first four games of the season, but then, on April 8 in a game at the Astrodome, you had a situation where you were hit in the left eye or near the left eye by a pitch thrown by Mike Torrez of the New York Mets. Tell us what happened.

A: Well, I think you know at the Astrodome, sometimes the ball would look dark. That day, I didn't see the ball very well. I saw it late. I wasn't an aggressive hitter. He struck me out with the slider away, and I think I was trying to hit too much to right field. He threw me a fastball inside and I reacted late. Usually that doesn't happen, and usually I was very quick getting out of the way. But that day I didn't see the ball very well. I saw it late. And you know, it happened, and I

got injured. That injury was tough on me because I never recuperated my vision the same way it was before.

Q: You mentioned about how Torrez had struck you out (earlier) on a pitch toward the outside. Did that make you move in on the plate a little bit more thinking he might go outside again?

A: Not really. I stayed the same, but I was looking too much to hit that way, and I forgot they throw inside sometimes to get you off the plate. So I think I was looking too much to right field, and I reacted late.

Q: You did have a stance that leaned into the plate a little bit, but that was also not uncommon at that time.

A: Yeah, I was very quick on the inside part of the plate with my quick hands. So I tried to take advantage of that, make the pitcher throw inside because I liked the ball inside. But sometimes you have to be aware that they can come in and get you off the plate, and it happens.

Q: So the pitch apparently glanced off your ear flap and then hit you above your left eye. Is that correct?

A: Yes, and I lost some vision in that left eye.

Q: And when it happened initially, at the moment it occurred, what went through your mind?

A: I felt that I was hurt. I didn't know how bad. If I was going to lose some vision, I didn't know. I felt the ball hit me pretty good, and I felt that I was going to be in trouble for a while. But what really hurt me was that I lost some vision.

Q: And when the pitch came in, if you watch the video of it, you're sort of backing away, but also sort of moving down a little bit. Obviously, in the moment, you don't have time to plan which way you go, but was it a situation where the way you moved and the way the pitch was moving sort of coincided?

A: Yes, and usually you will go back, so it hits you in the back. I went down instead of going back, but it happens.

Q: What about the quality of the helmets at that time? Is there anything about the way that they were made that would have made a difference in terms of your injury?

A: I think it would make a difference. I think that they're much better now, and they have that flap that they use that would have helped me. But I never used it even after I got hit and I lost some vision. I never felt comfortable. But I think it would have helped me.

Q: I read that you once said you kind of froze when the pitch came in. Is that true?

A: Ah, a little bit, but I meant that I saw the ball late. I think I usually see the ball sooner, so I usually get out of the way. But that day I saw it late.

Q: And at one point, I'd read that you had said that you were scared, but you also wanted to make sure that you lived from this.

A: Yeah, the pain was bad. I felt that it hit me pretty good. I never felt it that way. I got hit sometimes in the minor leagues and in Puerto Rico in the helmet, but this time, I thought it hit me pretty good. I didn't know how bad, but it hit me square.

Q: And you were taken to Methodist Hospital. Tell us what happened at the hospital.

A: Well, I don't remember much. I was in good pain, and I didn't know how bad it was going to be. They also really took care of me, and it really helped me a lot that that I felt that they did everything that they could have done to protect me.

Q: I know that Mike Torrez called you and was very apologetic. What do you remember about that call?

A: Yes, I remember. He told me (he) was very sorry, that he didn't really mean to hit me. I knew. I didn't feel that he was trying to hit me and then get me hurt. I know the kind of pitcher he was, he threw inside. And he was a very good pitcher, a tough pitcher to hit. So I never felt that was on purpose.

Q: He said it simply got away from him.

A: Well, I think he threw inside because, you know, those type of pitchers throw inside to throw away. He was trying to come in, let me know, and then go away again. And you know, I should have gotten out of the way. I don't think it was his fault.

Q: But it also sounds like the Astrodome background and the lighting really did make a difference.

A: Yeah, it's a tough place to hit. The ball will look a little darker than outside. But I felt good hitting in there. I still don't know. You know, it's not an excuse. But what happened, happened. And it happens a lot.

Q: Is it true that your wife, Bianca, was watching the game and went into labor because she saw what happened, and it was so distressing?

A: No, that was my sister-in-law.

Q: Ah, OK, I had read that it was your wife?

A: No, my sister-in-law, and it's true. She went to into labor.

Q: Ah, well, that's quite an event.

A: So every time I saw him, my nephew, I remember my injury because it was the same day he was born.

Q: The 1984 season was over for you, and I think you probably knew pretty early after the injury that you wouldn't be able to come back and play right away.

A: Yes. Once I noticed that my vision was bad, it was going to take some time.

Q: But there also was a psychological component to it. This really had significant effects upon you personally. Can you tell us about that?

A: Well, I was never afraid when I came back from the ball because I grew up playing. When I was a kid, I got hit a lot. So I was not afraid. The problem was that I had to deal with the injury. I had to realize I was not going to be the same player I was because of the injury. So that was the toughest thing for me to deal with. I tried all my life to be the best I could, be the best player I could. And at that time, I was not going to be the best I could be.

Q: And you started out with vision at 20/300. Blurred vision, but also depth perception problems.

A: Yes, I had to get used to it. I had to do things to help me with my vision. It was hard work to come back.

Q: And when you ultimately got back to the major leagues, you couldn't see. Was it a depth perception problem or did you have trouble making the ball, itself, out as it came toward the plate or both?

A: Both, but my depth perception was not the same. I had to learn how to hit again because I used to be a hitter that looked inside, and I became a hitter that looked outside because I couldn't pick up the balls as soon as I wanted to. So I made that adjustment, and it helped me out. I was not the same player, but I was a pretty good hitter. I became a decent hitter, but not the same hitter I was.

Q: And while you were recuperating, I know you were taking some business courses at a nearby community college. But you also took a course on sports psychology that I know was instrumental in helping you get back on the field.

A: Yeah, I took it because I wanted to deal with when you have an injury, and there's nothing that you can do about it. Before getting better, you have to deal psychologically with that injury. It helped me to understand that it's OK to be where you are at and do the best you can with the injury that you have. That took me some time.

Q: Now you did get back on the field late in the 1984 season in the Arizona Instructional League. You didn't get back to the major leagues in '84, and you also went on to play winter ball that year. As you were starting out following the injury, what was it like from a vision perspective?

A: It was funny because my first at-bat, I hit a home run. I hit a homer in (Hiram) Bithorn Stadium, but I didn't see the ball very well. I had about three or four more at-bats, and I didn't play more because I was not picking up the ball the way I wanted to. But that was one of the

things I had learned, that I was not going to see the ball the same way. But it's funny, I hit a homer in my first at-bat.

Q: Then you did come back, and you were the starting shortstop for the Astros to start the 1985 season. You certainly got enthusiastic support from the crowd on that Opening Day. What do you remember about it?

A: Yeah, I felt that the fans were very nice to me. They were good fans. Houston fans are very fair, and they always gave me encouragement to continue playing. They were very instrumental for me to be playing there again.

Q: And you did get a single, scored a run in that first game back. Had to give you some sense of optimism. At this point, you're under manager Bob Lillis. What did the team say to you about your prospects for being the regular shortstop?

A: Well, they gave me all the chances in the world. (Al) Rosen was the general manager. But I felt very bad because I could not basically do the things I was used to, and I couldn't give anymore. You know, I gave my best. And it was tough. It was tough not being able to be at the top of my game, and then realize that I could not be there anymore. But I learned I could be an average player and stay in the building, and that's what I did.

Q: Your vision was improving. You know, sometimes I guess 20/30 in some cases, but it seems as though the depth perception issue became more of a problem than whatever the numbers were reading the eye chart.

A: Yes. And it never came back because, you know, when I close my right eye, I don't see anything with my left eye. So it got better, but I never got to where I wanted to be again. It was tough to learn how to compete with only one eye, and I did it. But I had to pay a price. I was not the same player.

Q: And your left eye faces the pitcher as well. So that affects your ability. And just so I'm clear, you can't see anything out of your left eye when you close the right?

A: No, if I close my eye, I don't see you. I don't see anything. I see, but I don't see it clear, anything with any detail.

Q: As you went into the 1986 season, you had a new contract. Were things getting slowly better at least? I know they were never what they were, but was it at least improving?

A: Well, a little better. But you know what? I was facing more left-handed pitchers than before, and it really helped me because I was seeing the ball better. I guess lefty and righty, I was not the same with the right-handed pitching. That's why in 1986, I played a lot against lefties.

Q: And in '86, you were on the field when Mike Scott threw his no-hitter against San Francisco and clinched the National League West. What do you remember about that game?

A: Oh, I remember the way he dominated that game, he was amazing. He really was a tough pitcher for us, and he was one of the best in those years.

Q: Scott seemed like a quiet fellow and he just went out and had a bulldog mentality and shut down the other team. He's a hard person to have a real sense of from afar. What was he like?

A: He was very quiet. Very tough guy, but very quiet. He will protect your hitters anytime. If he felt that anybody was throwing at us, he would not hesitate to hit anybody on the other team. So he was a very good teammate.

Q: Even amidst your recovery, you did hit a home run off Sid Fernandez in Game Four of the National League Championship Series. What do you remember about that home run?

A: I was very excited. I was in New York. I had a lot of family there. Sid was the pitcher. The Mets had very good pitching, and I thought we were going to win that series, but we lost too. It was tough, but we played well and we faced a very good team.

Q: That 1986 Astros-Mets series is one of the legendary playoff series of all time, and easily could have gone either way. What do you think was the turning point in that series that made it so the Mets were able to pull it out?

A: You know, the (Lenny) Dykstra homer was very important for them, and also they had such a good lineup. It was a very tough lineup that I felt we needed to score more runs to beat them, but they had good pitching too. So it was a very tough team to beat.

Q: As you reached the end of your Astros career, I know you had some disagreements with the general manager, Dick Wagner. Did that play a role in the eventual end of your time in Houston?

A: Yes, Dick Wagner was a very old school kind of guy. He didn't really understand that my injury sometimes needed some time off to come back strong. He didn't really treat me very well, and I didn't feel good playing for him. That really caused me to get out of Houston. I felt bad because that's where my home was and that was my team. But it's a business and that's the way it was.

Q: In terms of your own recovery from your injury, is there anything that you or anyone could have done differently?

A: No, because I have a scar tissue in my left eye that nothing can be done. So I did everything to get better. Houston did everything, so I had to realize that is part of the game. It is an injury. You either do your job or you don't, and it's a tough business.

Q: Now, after your time with the Astros was over, you signed with the San Diego Padres. But you're also coming in as a backup to Garry Templeton. What was your thinking in going to the Padres?

A: You know what's funny? I was going to retire. And I went to the game in the Bithorn Stadium, and Larry Bowa was at the game. He saw me, and he asked me if I wanted to play anymore. He would give me a chance in San Diego because they were looking for a backup for Garry. I said I will think about it and I will let you know. So about a month passed and I called him, and he gave me a chance. I made the team and the rest is history. I played like 10 more years.

Q: Tell us about Tony Gwynn and what it was like both to be his teammate and to watch him play.

A: Oh Tony, you know, I played with Tony in Puerto Rico two years before he became a star in San Diego, so I knew Tony well. And what really impressed me was his discipline as a player and as a hitter. What a great player, very similar to Rod Carew. So it was a pleasure to play with him.

Q: Your time with the Padres was relatively short, and then you're traded to the Philadelphia Phillies. How did you feel about that?

A: Oh, I felt good because I wanted them to give me a chance to try to play every day again before I retired. So I had a chance to play a lot, and I led National League shortstops in homers and RBIs, and I hit .270 which is pretty good for a shortstop. It was good that I played those three years in Philly regularly. I felt good that I could do that, and they gave me a chance.

Q: You switched to a heavier bat during that time, 34 ounces to 38 ounces. Why did you do it?

A: Because I separated from home plate. I was hitting too close to home plate, and I was getting away too soon. So I got a bigger bat and I got out off of the plate. I tried to hit everything to right field, and it really helped me.

Q: You had adjusted your batting stance following the injury, and you were not as close to the plate as you had been previously. That has to make a real difference in terms of your ability to hit. It almost must be like learning how to hit all over again.

A: Yeah, it was tough in the beginning, but I was lucky enough to produce in Philly that year, so they gave me a chance to play every day. I was not the same hitter by any means. But I hit better than the average and I had some homers and RBIs. And it helped me to play a couple years more.

Q: In your time in Philadelphia, you played with the nucleus of that 1993 team. There were several players like Darren Daulton, who was on that team, and Lenny Dykstra, John Kruk. Tell us about what the atmosphere was like around those Phillies teams.

A: It was a little crazy. Lenny, you know, everybody knows Lenny. Very good player, hustles. He was undisciplined as a player, but he was a good player. Kruk was a very good player.

Daulton was very good. We had good players. They were young when I was there, and they became better players before that World Series. They had good careers.

Q: You mentioned earlier about when you were a young player coming up and who mentored you. Were you trying to fill the role of a veteran mentor at any point?

A: I was not because I didn't feel that I was a player that could say things to young players. I was trying to make it in the big leagues, stay in the big leagues. I was not the same player I was before, so I pretty much kept quiet. But if I could help, I tried to help.

Q: You were playing every day in spite of the injury when you were in Philadelphia. You did go back to the Astrodome and hit two home runs there, which I imagine was a particularly satisfying day, wasn't it?

A: Oh yeah, I remember it. Jim Deshaies, I took him deep twice, and then my last year with the Phillies, I took Mike Scott deep twice in the Astrodome, too. That was a thrill.

Q: You played in 1992, but you also, after your injury, were having trouble. You were occasionally on the disabled list, and it just had some inconsistency to your time. Sometimes you struggled and sometimes you did well. I know the Phillies didn't offer you a contract following the 1992 season. What were you thinking would happen next?

A: Well, they offered me a contract for one year. I wanted two years. They didn't give me two years, so I that's why I became a free agent and went to Texas. I was not the same player. I was getting injured. I was not playing every day, so I struggled a little bit. I had some good months, but I was not consistent.

Q: You did receive the Tony Conigliaro Award, and Conigliaro himself recovered from a serious eye injury from a pitch. What did that award mean to you?

A: A lot because it meant that I had showed the people in the business that I came back, and I tried to do my best. Tony Conigliaro was a great player. This thing happened to him, and it really hurt his career. It really hurt my career too. I was a good player, but I became an average player, so to get that prize was very important for me.

Q: When you joined the Texas Rangers, you were going back to the state of Texas where you've had so much success with Houston. Did that make a difference to you?

A: Not really. I went to Texas because I wanted to be closer to home in Houston. There were a lot of very good young players like Iván Rodríguez, Igor (Juan) González, Caballo (Rubén Sierra). They had very good young players. It was a nice experience, but I was not the same consistent player. I didn't play bad, but I didn't play the way I wanted to.

Q: You ultimately signed with the Milwaukee Brewers for 1993, and you would go on, eventually, to sign a minor league contract with Oakland in 1994 but then retired, saying that you

weren't seeing the ball well enough. Was your vision from the time of the injury until the end of your career, was your vision roughly the same or did it vary? And did it get worse?

A: No, it sometimes got worse because you lose vision little by little. I was not the same. I didn't feel the same. It was tough to realize that that the vision was not coming back. I knew I could do the job, but it was tough to be consistent.

Q: Did you find that the depth perception problems were more difficult at bat or in the field?

A: At bat. You don't have that much time at bat. In the field, you have a little more time to adjust. At bat, there was some times I didn't see the ball, and I said "I don't know how I'm going to hit." You know, I figured it out, but hitting was tough.

Q: Obviously it's something that you've had to deal with ever since, but you definitely had the perception of someone who really worked hard to stay in the major leagues because after that injury, you played essentially a decade afterward with subpar vision. That had to have taken a certain amount of internal strength.

A: Yes. I wanted to play so bad. It was hard. Sometimes I felt like I didn't want to play because I couldn't produce the same way. But I got to a point that if I could play more years in the big leagues, I was going to try. And I always worked very hard, and I had a chance to play a lot in Puerto Rico. I had a lot of experience as a player, so that really helped me because I knew how to position myself. Like now they use shifts. I used to do that. I used to work and watch where the hitter's hitting and how the pitcher is throwing and what he's going to throw. So that really helped me a lot.

Q: Following your career, you were involved with some work on the minor league level, including with the Astros as a minor league baserunning and infield instructor. You also were involved with the Winter League in Puerto Rico. How much do you enjoy coaching?

A: I enjoyed coaching a lot. The only thing I didn't like was that they took too much time away from the family, and I didn't want to do that all over again. That's why I didn't stay longer. Coaching in the minor leagues is very tough. You have to spend a lot of time away from family. I enjoy helping young guys, but I want my family more.

Q: I know in 2011 you met with Mike Torrez for the first time following the injury. Obviously, that's decades later. What prompted the meeting?

A: It was a gathering for the Mets, and they invited me. I think it was from the alumni (association), and I went. I didn't expect that he was going to be there. He looked at me and I looked at him, and it was funny because we didn't know what to do. But I went to him, and I said hello and he was very nice. He apologized for what happened. It was a good meeting.

Q: What have you been doing in recent years?

A: Well, I've been involved in winter ball in Puerto Rico. I even bought a team in winter ball, and I've really been involved with young guys trying to help them prepare to become professional. And that's what I've been doing.

Q: What do you think of modern baseball?

A: Too many rules. I think the game has become a little soft. I think pitchers are trying to be too perfect because of the information they have. Sometimes the game is a little predictable, and I think they should get rid of some of the things about double plays. I don't like that. I don't like not being able to hit the catcher. Little things like that I don't like.

Q: In terms of the kind of player that you were, it's hard to imagine someone playing shortstop in the style that you did today.

A: Oh yeah. I remember when I was coming up I used to work out a lot around the base for turning double plays because in those days, runners could hit you. I had to learn how to do different things, so I could avoid being hit by these big guys. That was part of the game. Now you don't have to worry about that.

Q: What is your favorite on-field highlight of your career?

A: The All-Star Game. Being on the same field with those great players. To me that was a great time.

Q: What would you like people to remember most about your career and you personally?

A: That I did my best. That I worked hard. That I played hard. Respect the opponent and try to beat him. That's what I like to be remembered for.

Q: Dickie Thon, we are grateful for you taking time to speak with us today for our SABR oral history interview.

A: Oh, you're welcome. It's been a pleasure.