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Sports Column

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In Search of Ted Williams

We were just a couple of guys taking the baseball cure.

Jon and I were both coming off painful divorces (is there any other kind?), taking a week's vacation in Florida in March for Spring Training. This was 1985.

Our goal, our quest really, was to meet the great Ted Williams, the hero of our youth. Our task was to get his signature on a poster of his likeness that had been Jon's for 25 years, a beautiful drawing of "Number Nine" standing in repose, leaning on his bat. And we achieved our goal, accomplished our task, on the very first day.

Just one other civilian was watching the ballplayers, all minor leaguers, work out on the lower fields at the Red Sox complex that first morning: a young man who was a functionary in the team's front office. We asked him the best way to get Ted's signature on the poster rolled up in Jon's hand. "Should we leave it in the office and pick it up later in the week?" Jon asked.

"Nah," he said. "He'd love to sign it." He pointed to the field and said, "He's right there. Just wait for this drill to end and ask him."

Sure enough, there was Ted Williams, not 50 feet away, standing behind a batting cage, big as life, in Red Sox away-grays and a blue windbreaker, offering encouragement to hitters taking their cuts in the cage.

No entourage. No bodyguards. No gallery. Ted Williams, the Kid himself. For Jon and me, he was Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Mark McGwire in one. Just us and Teddy Ballgame on a sleepy morning on a diamond in Florida. Didn't matter that he was 67 and we were 40. Brigadoon. Ten minutes later, when he walked off the field for a break, we approached him like nervous kids.

Jon asked him to personalize the message: "Please write 'To all the Coffins.'"

"You don't want me to do that," Ted asserted. "This poster's not worth anything if I write that - and it's worth maybe a couple hundred bucks if I don't. You can sell it."

Jon was horrified at the thought. "I'm not selling it. It's priceless to me if you sign it to my family." So Ted wrote a personal greeting in his graceful script and Jon had his treasured family artifact.

For the next seven days, Jon and I spent Spring Training in Winter Haven with Ted Williams. At least, that's how we look at it. In the mornings, we came out for the drills and practices; in the afternoons, we watched a "B" game, sitting on a bench a few feet away from Ted and his buddy, Johnny Pesky, in their golf cart. These games were between Red Sox minor leaguers and the farmhands of other major league teams.

We eavesdropped on Ted and Johnny's conversations, talked to the players and their parents and girlfriends, and watched the Grand Ol' Game in 80 degree sunlight in March, far from our lives in Vermont. We hung out. We relaxed. We scoped out the Red Sox prospects, and came home convinced that Sam Horn and John Marzano and Rey Quinones were on the fast track to Cooperstown. It was perfect.

On the afternoons when the Sox minor and major-leaguers were on the road, we headed to nearby Lakeland to watch the Tigers, or to Plant City and the Reds. We saw the Mets in Tampa and marveled at the ability of young Darryl Strawberry. We watched Oil Can Boyd tame the Tigers and sat behind Robin Roberts and Richie Ashburn in St. Pete when the Phillies played the Cards.

On occasion, Ted would invite us into his orbit. He asked me once what the "M" on my baseball cap stood for - and then told us that he knew Middlebury and had an ex-wife who lived in Burlington. He made fun of my cap because it was half-mesh. He admired my camera. He signed autographs for my dad and Rudi Haerle. He acknowledged us: we were the guys from Vermont.

At noon and in late afternoons when no baseball was being played, Jon and I repaired to the Best Western Motel where we were staying and played catch or hit each other grounders on the lawn next to the pool. At night, after the evening's game, we went out to eat. One night we sat next to Bill Buckner and his family. We gave him the high sign and he smiled and nodded. Jon, who doesn't drink alcohol, had discovered fruit drinks, so he often ordered a "Virgin Daiquiri" or a "Virgin Pina Colada" to go along with my beer. People thought we were gay. So what?

We learned about baseball, batting especially, from watching the practices.

Hitting a baseball is hard. Batters have two-fifths of a second to decide whether to swing at a pitch - and on what plane. In all the hours we observed Ted Williams instruct young hitters, we never heard him say a negative word. He encouraged hitters with problems and exulted with those on a tear - all in language saltier than any drill sergeant's.

That spring of '85 was the last one Ted spent as a full-time Spring Training presence. We saw him in his prime and he did not disappoint. The autographed poster occupies a prominent place in Jon's home in Grand Isle. I have since gone back to Spring Training twice, no longer to ease my pain, but with my next (and current and last, I trust) wife, a great fan and companion-in-arms, who for three summers in the 1980s was the scoreboard operator for the San Francisco Giants at Candlestick Park.

Ted Williams, the Kid, is now 81, and frail, after a series of strokes. Jon and I have lived long enough to know that we're headed in that direction, but know too that we have miles to go before we sleep - and many more ballgames to see.