

By Paul Goldman,
Peter Dreier, and
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SPORTS

Jim Bouton follows his dream

In 1970 ex-New York Yankee pitcher Jim Bouton shook the baseball world with *Ball Four*, a best-selling irreverent inside look at life in the "biggies." *I'm Glad You Didn't Take It Personally* followed a year later.

We caught Jim Bouton and some of his Portland Maverick teammates during a minor league game in Eugene. Bouton, age 38 and attempting to knuckleball his way back into the big leagues, was expansive and relaxed even after having been knocked out of the box by an eight-run barrage in the third inning by the Eugene Emeralds, the Cincinnati Reds "single-A" minor league team.

As a hard-throwing Yankee pitcher Bouton won 21 games in 1963 and two World Series games. The Yankees let Bouton go when his arm gave out, but Bouton hung on with the Houston Astros, Seattle Pilots and a few minor league teams until 1970, when he called it quits, saying he couldn't drag his family through the minors again.

He then cashed in his "celebrity" status and spent several years as ABC-TV's nightly sportscaster in New York. He also played the lead in a TV version of *Ball Four*, which played for 13 weeks last year.

Having made the circuit—from the minor league where he started in 1959, to the majors, and now back to the minors—Bouton is ideally suited to describe the changes in minor league baseball.

Less desperate and uptight.

The most important change has been in the attitudes of both players and management. Minor leaguers are "less desperate" and "uptight" than they used to be, he says. While each player still wants to make it to the majors, and usually believes that he is good enough to do it, failure seems less traumatic. "They understand that the most important thing in life isn't hitting a ball with a stick."

Demographic changes have played a part in this transition. The days when a small-town high school star could jump to the high minor leagues or even the big time are over. According to Bouton, the typical new baseball talent is a young white from the suburbs of the sunbelt where baseball is played all year. Many players also have at least a couple of years of college (and college ball) under their belts when they sign their first contract.

Changes in the structure of baseball itself may have reduced the pressure too. Once there were over a hundred minor leagues; almost every small town in the U.S. boasted its own farm team and local heroes. Today only seventeen minor leagues remain.

The demise of the minors reflects the rise of televised baseball and the emergence of colleges as a free farm system, weeding out players who previously would have toiled in the minors. As a result, fewer players get an opportunity to play in the minors, but those who are signed by pro clubs have a realistic—though still small—chance of making it. About seven percent reach the majors.

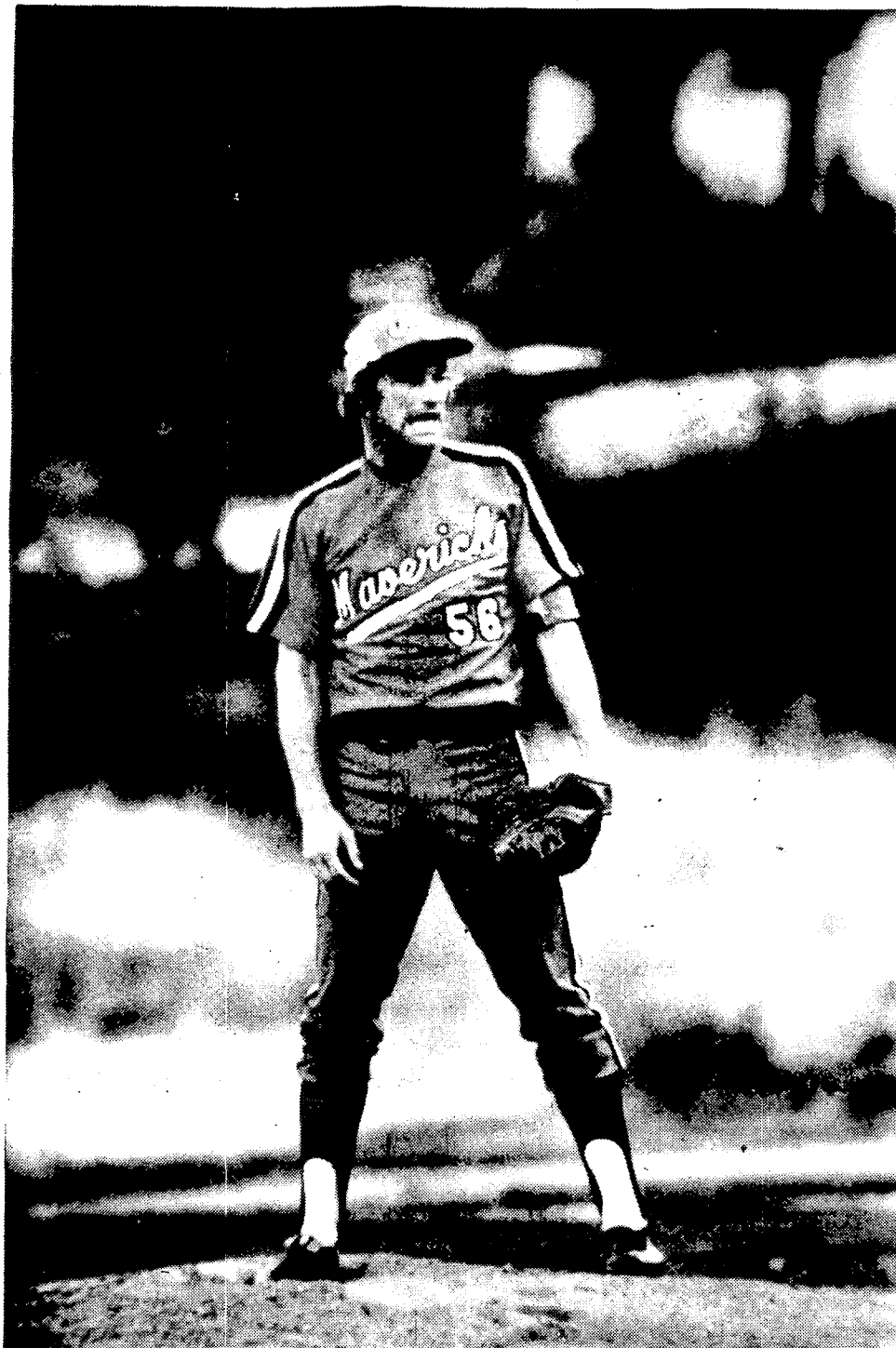
Bouton recalled that when he joined the Yankee system in 1959 (after a year at Western Michigan University) there were 100 minor league pitchers above him on the various Yankee farm teams. Now each major league team owns only three minor league clubs and keeps careful track of its young players.

Hungriest team in baseball.

Independent teams like Bouton's Portland Mavericks sign players passed up by major league scouts, and often field a team of older players.

All players on the Mavs earn \$400 per month during their June through August baseball season. All have regular off-season jobs—as lumberjacks, sporting goods salesmen, schoolteachers, bartenders, and so on. Several even hold jobs during the season, forcing them to miss road trips on occasion.

Few Mavs expect a major league club



Bouton is working on his knuckleball, an "old man's pitch" that is effective and easier on the arm.

Jim Bouton has made the circuit—from the minor leagues, to the majors, and now back to the minors, with a couple of books and a newscasting stint in between.

will sign them, but almost all we interviewed hope to give it "one more year" before giving up on their dream.

In the team's five-year existence under owner Bing Russell the Mavs have yet to send a player to the major leagues. Of 13 Mavs signed by pro teams, only two have gone as far as the "triple-A" level and both quit after a brief stint. With those odds, Russell comments that "this is the hungriest team in all of baseball."

For the Eugene Emeralds, minor league life is only slightly better. All have contracts with the Cincinnati Reds. The Reds front office likes to sign young players (average age on the Ems is 19), and a relatively high proportion of Latin ballplayers.

Pat Ingraham, a 21-year old center-fielder from the Bahamas, is the team's leading hitter, batting close to .400. He earns \$600 a month for June, July and August and works in a carpentry shop in Freeport during the off-season.

Now in his third year at Eugene, In-

graham says he'll give pro baseball another two or three years. "You don't know where you're going to be next year, or even next week." The Reds could shift him to their AA or AAA farm teams or release him altogether.

Ingraham, like many of his teammates, doesn't have a college degree or other career plans if he strikes out in baseball. "I try not to think about that," he says.

John Underwood, the Em's manager, is only 22 years old and reflects a trend in minor league management. There are few jobs available for the grizzled old veteran whose main qualification is that he is a crony of the big club's manager. This has resulted in a more relaxed atmosphere on minor league teams with less stress on conformity.

Play to win and have fun.

Still, the Ems enforce some degree of discipline, such as nightly bedchecks.

The independent Mavs, in contrast, view the game differently. "All we do is play to win, chase women, drink and have fun," says the Mavs' Russell, a Hollywood actor best known for his long stint on TV's *Bonanza*.

Which regimen is best? Few individual Mavs will climb much higher in pro baseball, but as a team they are the winningest club in the Northwest League.

Everyday life in the six-team league hasn't changed much. All the teams are within 300 miles of each other, but eight or ten hour bus trips still give the minors an aura of "a traveling circus," in the words of one player. A few players commute on the shorter trips.

The three-month Northwest League circuit—Salem, Eugene, Portland, Grays Harbor, Bellingham, and Walla Walla—suggest that the small city, but not the small town, has survived the decline of the minor leagues. Attendance at Eugene's rickety Civic Stadium—which the local government almost condemned earlier in the summer and which will close unless someone comes up with \$38,000 in repairs—averages under 1,000. Portland attracts more fans and Bellingham fewer. Few minor league teams are money-making operations.

Bouton is adamant that a strike would be a total failure in the minor leagues—unlike the majors, where a 1972 strike cut into the season. "Minor league ballplayers have *absolutely no leverage*. None. If every minor leaguer went on strike, they'd go three years without letting them play," Bouton says. "The first minor leaguer who stood up in the clubhouse to call for a union would be found in the river with cement spikes on!"

Following a dream.

Politically, Bouton's a liberal humanist, but he's also very individualistic, a hustler. He was recently asked to do a TV commercial for a Portland lumber company. "If it's a choice between ravaging the environment and a couple of hundred bucks," he says, smiling but slightly guilty, "I'd take the bucks."

Bouton made \$80,000 a year as a broadcaster, compared to his six year major league average of \$19,000. Joining the Mavs in early July, after being released by the "double A" Knoxville Sox, Bouton gets the same \$400 a month as everyone else.

He sold his \$125,000 home in the New Jersey suburbs and bought a less expensive house nearby, but he doesn't know what he'll do after the season is over. He expects to be back in Portland next summer, maybe play winter league ball in Latin America in-between.

He has few regrets leaving TV sportscasting behind. "I decided that my day to day happiness is more important."

How does Jim Bouton—baseball's iconoclast, a minor culture hero—fit into this old fashioned game played by young men? The minor league players—many half his age and away from home for the first time—look at Bouton as a guru who rose to fame with the Yankees and fortune with his book and TV, but who still just enjoys playing baseball. He relates easily to these young men because he shares with them the same dream.

More than anything else, Jim Bouton wants to play baseball, preferably once again in the majors. He's not planning another book because that would impair the concentration needed to perfect his knuckleball—an "old man's" pitch that is difficult to control but both effective and easier on the arm. Bouton knocks the mystification of baseball and the baseball establishment, but not the game itself.

For Bouton, even after a 21-game season, two World Series victories, and a successful career outside baseball, pitching in the big leagues is still his biggest dream. For millions of other young men, old men and a growing number of women as well, that dream still has a powerful influence on their lives.

The three authors teach sociology—Paul and Mimi Goldman at the University of Oregon, Peter Dreier at Tufts University. All are available for the next player draft.

ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

PERFORMANCE



Lily Tomlin and Bette Midler were among the headliners at the Hollywood "Celebration for Human Rights." "You payed \$50 to this?" Midler asked.

Midler shines, Pryor fumes at Hollywood rights gala

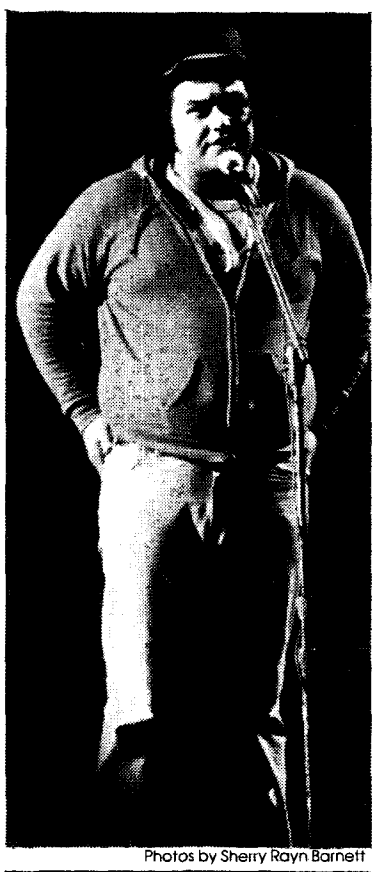
The concert was announced in a spectacular two-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times* as "A Celebration for Human Rights"—starring Bette Midler, Richard Pryor and Lily Tomlin (in that order).

Producer Aaron Russo was quoted on the purpose of the event—"to make clear to the eyes and ears of the country that the entertainment industry feels deeply about human rights." A list of notables endorsed the concert and the concept: Woody Allen, Richard Avedon, Candice Bergen, Ray Bradbury, Lauren Bacall, Phyllis Diller, Alice Cooper, George Gobel, Roosevelt Grier, Chevy Chase, Garson Kanin, Eartha Kitt, Burt Lancaster, Shirley MacLaine, Joni Mitchell, Mayor George Moscone (of San Francisco), Paul Newman, Linda Ronstadt, Tommy Smothers and Barbra Streisand, et al.

A crowd that paid between \$5 and \$50 per ticket filled the Hollywood Bowl to capacity Sunday night (Sept. 18), and the gross (all of it going to the *Save Our Human Rights Foundation*) was estimated at \$350,000. As an answer to Anita Bryant & Co., the concert was a big success.

As entertainment it was not so successful.

It began with an all-too-brief bit by Lily Tomlin, for which she received a standing ovation. But when people stood during the four hours of "surprise" entertainment that followed, it was frequently to find their way to the parking lot. The surprises



Photos by Sherry Rayn Barnett

Producer Russo apologizes for Pryor's tirade.

included ballet dancers Johnna Kirland and John Clifford, the singing group War, David Steinberg and too many others. But the big surprise of the evening was a monolog by Richard Pryor, whose second comedy series is currently on NBC.

Pryor, whose live routines have always been laced with obscenities, launched into what

was either a tasteless satire on gays, or a criticism of the concert for "emphasizing gay rights over other human rights"—depending on who is interpreting. The audience was at first stunned and then angry. Jeers and boos got to Pryor, who shifted from his original focus to an attack on the predominantly white audience for hypocrisy. "Where were you all when Watts was being burned down?" he asked. "you were doing what you wanted to do on Hollywood Boulevard and didn't give a damn about it."

Before he was booed off the stage and into his waiting limousine, Pryor got in one more lick: "This is an evening about human rights and I'm a human being. And I just wanted to see where you're really at."

Producer Russo followed with an unscheduled personal appearance—to apologize. But it took Bette Midler to pull the divided crowd together.

The energy generated by Midler's extraordinary musical talent, which was enhanced by the Harlettes, stopped the exodus. Her spontaneous evaluation of the affair did a lot to defuse the distress. Her "You mean you paid \$50 for this?" brought the kind of universal guffaw that was needed.

It all ended in a blaze of fireworks, orchestral overtones of "The Star Spangled Banner," and neon salutes to "liberty and justice for all."

—Sherry Rayn Barnett
Sherry Rayn Barnett is a freelance photographer in L.A.

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