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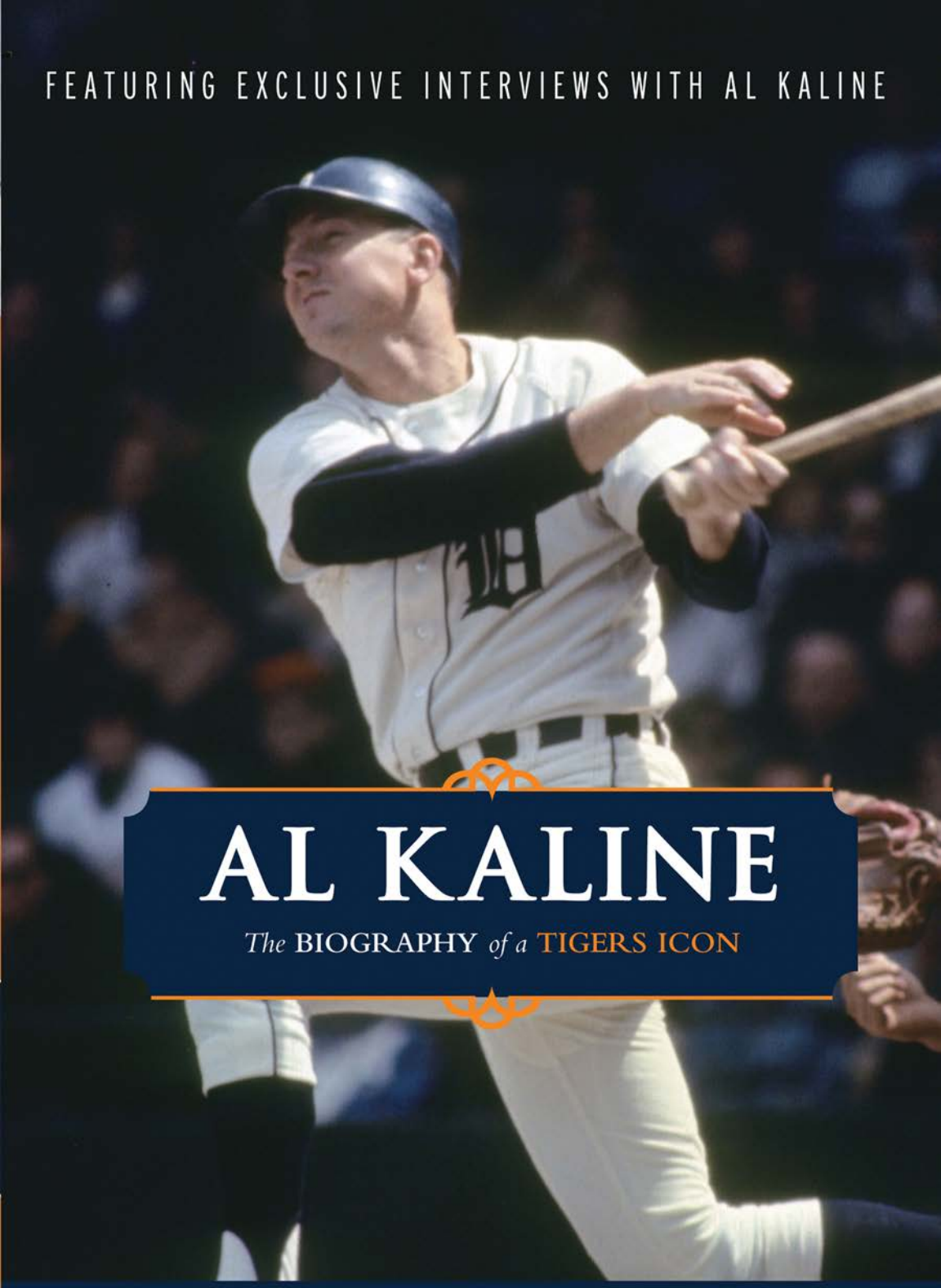

AL KALINE

The BIOGRAPHY *of a* TIGERS ICON

JIM HAWKINS | Foreword by ERNIE HARWELL

Al Kaline

The Biography of a Tigers Icon

Al Kaline

The Biography of a Tigers Icon

Jim Hawkins

TRIUMPH BOOKS

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To Penny, who has made
everything possible

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Foreword

Al Kaline has never wanted the attention of a biography.

From that day on June 23, 1953, when he first joined the Detroit Tigers team at Shibe Park in Philadelphia, a scrawny 18-year-old high school kid from Baltimore suffering from a foot deformity and weighing only 150 pounds—so skinny he had to wear the batboy's uniform on his first few nights in the big leagues because that was the only one that fit—Al has always been a very private person.

Yet no big-league star deserves a biography more.

Baseball biographies now seem to be hitting the bookstores at the rate of one or two a month. Some are warranted and well done, but many are merely pedestrian career recaps pasted together with reheated stories from old newspaper files.

This one is different. It's much more in-depth. It is a true picture of a superstar who, despite his great talent and reputation, has somehow escaped the spotlight.

Kaline's story is fascinating. A kid with only high school experience becomes one of the superstars of the game. It is a story that has never been accorded a much-deserved, in-depth biography. But now we have one by Jim Hawkins, the best possible writer to relate the Al Kaline story.

I have known Al Kaline for 50 years, and I have known Jim Hawkins for 40. I am delighted that they have teamed up to bring you this story that is so long overdue.

When Al joined the Tigers in 1953, he was lonely, scared—even terrified. Certainly he had no idea what the world of professional baseball held for him.

Little did he, or anyone else, dream that half a century later he would be Mr. Tiger. The Consummate Professional. A Hall of Famer and the most famous of all Tigers, with the exception of Ty Cobb.

When Cobb joined the Detroit team in August 1905, he had already played two years in the minors. Almost all the other Hall of Famers served minor-league apprenticeships. I am talking about Babe Ruth, Walter Johnson, Christy Mathewson, Lou Gehrig, Willie Mays, Joe DiMaggio, Stan Musial, Rogers Hornsby, Jackie Robinson, Hank Aaron, and Ted Williams—the greatest of the greats.

But not Al Kaline. Al never spent one day—not one minute—in the minor leagues.

That makes his story all the more remarkable.

You will enjoy the down-to-earth, straightforward writing style of Jim Hawkins, who has known Al for 40 years, both as a player and as a close friend and confidant.

Like Kaline, Jim, who grew up in Wisconsin, came to Detroit from Baltimore. He joined the *Detroit Free Press* as the Tigers beat writer in 1970 and later authored books about Tigers stars Mark "the Bird" Fidrych and Ron LeFlore, as well as writing *The Detroit Tigers Encyclopedia* with former Tigers executive Dan Ewald.

Hawkins, who is still part of the city's sports scene, has not only covered the exploits of Al Kaline but has also closely followed the ups and downs of the franchise for which Al has served as a player, television analyst, and front-office advisor for 58 years.

Nobody can tell this story better than Jim Hawkins. And nobody deserves to have his story told more than Al Kaline.

—Ernie Harwell
September 1, 2009

Acknowledgments

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Thanks also go to those who preceded me on this subject and provided valuable background, including my mentor for many years, Joe Falls; my predecessor at the *Detroit Free Press*, George Cantor; and author Hal Butler.

Thanks also to the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Oakland (Mich.) Press*, and the Detroit Tigers, who put me in a position and gave me the access necessary to chronicle much of this story firsthand; and to Baseball-Reference.com, which filled in the gaps when Kaline's memory, or mine, failed.

Special thanks go to Ernie Harwell, who graciously took the time to write the foreword for this book at what had to be the most trying time of his storied life.

Most of all, the author would like to thank Al Kaline for his cooperation on this book and for his four decades of friendship.

CHAPTER 1

Mr. Tiger

They don't make baseball players like Al Kaline anymore. That is what is wrong with the not-always-so-grand old game today.

No salacious scandal has ever tainted his name. Never has there been the slightest suggestion that he ever used steroids to juice up his statistics. No mind-numbing eight-digit salary or cushy multi-year contract, nice as that might have been, ever drove a wedge between Al and reality.

His has just been a long life filled with baseball. How boring. How beautiful. How rare. One team. One wife. One life. Al Kaline never asked for or dreamed of anything more.

What are the odds that a shy, skinny 18-year-old kid with a deformed left foot could go straight from high school and the sandlots of blue-collar Baltimore to the bright lights of the big leagues, win the American League batting title in just his second full season in the show, and last 22 years before ending up a first-ballot choice for baseball's Hall of Fame and becoming forever synonymous with the storied franchise that discovered him?

Incredible.

"I think about that so much," Kaline admitted one sunny summer afternoon during the 2009 baseball season as he sat in the dugout at soon-to-be-packed Comerica Park, watching the Detroit Tigers take batting practice.

"I put so much effort into becoming a baseball player. It's almost scary. What if I had failed? What would I have done with my life? What if I had

had to do what my dad did, which was to quit school at 16 and go to work? He went to work as a broom maker. Can you imagine? They don't even make brooms anymore, I don't think. It could have been a nightmare."

Instead, Kaline's story became a fairytale.

Baseball is America, and Al Kaline is baseball. Ten Gold Gloves, 18 All-Star Games, 3,007 base hits, 399 home runs, a batting crown, and a World Series championship.

Al Kaline may not have been the best ballplayer ever to wear the Olde English D. That distinction rightfully belongs to Ty Cobb. But to this day, after six decades in the organization, he remains the most beloved, the most revered hero that Tigers fans have ever known. The world has changed. People have changed. Baseball has changed. But Al Kaline has not changed.

Kaline's 22-year playing career with the Tigers—which featured so many clutch hits, so many marvelous catches, so many rifle-like throws—began in the era of day games, bonus babies, and Knot Hole Gangs, when baseball truly was our national pastime and the country worshipped its flannel-clad heroes from afar, via radios or on snowy black-and-white TV screens.

He is a throwback to a simpler time. A time before computers, cell phones, or the Internet. A time before blogs and text messages and, God forbid, Tweets. A time before playoffs, wild cards, and interleague play. A time when every big-league player had a roommate on the road and teammates regularly went out to dinner or to a movie together. A time when players had to find jobs during the winter months to support their families and make ends meet. A time when there were eight teams in the American League and eight in the National, none located west of St. Louis. A time when ballplayers had magical nicknames like Pee Wee and Yogi and great debates raged over who was better—Willie, Mickey, or the Duke.

It was a time when baseball teams rode trains from town to town, wore scratchy wool uniforms, and sang songs on the late-night bus rides from the ballpark. A time when even the biggest stars worked under one-year contracts, and pay cuts—yes, pay cuts—were commonplace. A time when holdouts were rare and agents even rarer.

A time when guys truly did play for the love of the game.

In Kaline's day, especially during Al's early years, players accepted whatever salary a team was willing to offer them—take it or leave it. And they did so until that team decided to trade them or cut them loose.

There was no free agency, no arbitration, and no alternative—except, of course, getting a job in the real world, packing a lunch, and going to work.

And Kaline loved every minute of it. He still does. "I hate to think about those people who have to go to work every day who really regret going to work," Al said softly, thoughtfully, as he exited the dugout and headed upstairs to the Comerica Park press box where, as a special assistant to Tigers president and general manager Dave Dombrowski, Kaline now watches game after game, night after night, year after year, from one of the executive suites. "And I know there are a lot of people like that.

"There I was, at 18 years old, doing exactly what I wanted to do with my life. And I'm still doing exactly what I've wanted to do, ever since I was 13 years of age. How lucky can you be!"

For 22 years, Kaline personified perfection in the outfield. Right field at recently demolished Tiger Stadium became known as "Kaline's Corner." And for 58 years, Kaline has personified the Detroit Tigers.

The story of Al Kaline—like the stories of fellow icons Ty Cobb, Hank Greenberg, Charlie Gehringer, and Alan Trammell—is the story of the Detroit Tigers. The history of the team can be neatly cubbyholed into four eras, each highlighted by a pennant or a world championship.

The Tigers won back-to-back-to-back American League titles in 1907, 1908, and 1909, soon after the irascible Cobb arrived in Detroit. Thanks to Greenberg and Gehringer, they again claimed pennants in 1934 and 1935 and won the franchise's first World Series in 1935. The year 1968 belonged to Kaline, along with Denny McLain and Mickey Lolich. And the Tigers went wire-to-wire in 1984, led by Trammell, the World Series MVP.

Kaline's tenure has spanned 11 United States presidents, from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Barack Obama; 11 Tigers team presidents; a dozen general managers; and 22 managers, from Fred Hutchinson to Jim Leyland. Since 1953 Al Kaline has been the one constant in the Detroit Tigers organization.

"Everything is different now," Kaline admitted. "Only the game itself is still the same."

Al Kaline was never a headline grabber or a money-grubber. In his mind, the game was never about him. He was a ballplayer's ballplayer.

Kaline didn't knock you over with his numbers. At least not until you added them all up, as the veteran members of the Baseball Writers Association of America did in 1980 when they examined Al's 22-year body of work and overwhelmingly—and surprisingly—elected him to the Hall of Fame on the first ballot, just the 10th player in the history of the game, at that time, to be so honored.

Neither a slugger nor a speedster, Kaline was a complete ballplayer, adept at every aspect of the game.

"I call Al our Abraham Lincoln," declared Willie Horton, the popular former Detroit star and Kaline's longtime Tigers teammate, who, like Al, today serves as an advisor in the team's front office.

"He was our leader. He was the man with the tie on. He always set the tone for our team."

Leave it to Horton who, like Kaline, has grown more eloquent with age, to put the career of the Greatest Living Tiger into perspective.

"Al has forgotten this, but I met Al when I was just a kid hanging around Briggs Stadium," recalled Horton, who grew up in a housing project in Detroit's inner city, not far from the old ballpark.

"Then all of sudden, I was there playing with him. Coming up, I watched him a lot. I loved talking about the game with Al. If you went to him, he'd speak from the heart. He had quiet leadership.

"I saw how he went about his business and prepared for games. I watched him in batting practice. He made me a better hitter. He made me a better outfielder. It was an incentive just to come up to his level of expertise."

In 1963 Charlie Dressen—who had managed the Cincinnati Reds, Brooklyn Dodgers, Washington Senators, and Milwaukee Braves before joining the Tigers—was asked to name the greatest player he had ever managed.

"Jackie Robinson was the most exciting runner I ever had," Dressen declared. "He couldn't be equaled on the bases. He could rob a team blind. Pee Wee Reese was the gustiest little infielder I ever had. I'd have to put Roy Campanella in a class with Mickey Cochrane, Gabby Harnett, and Bill Dickey. And Hank Aaron is the best hitter I ever had.

"But in my heart, I'm convinced Kaline is the best player who ever played for me. For all-around ability—I mean hitting, fielding, running, and throwing—I'll go with Al."

No less of an authority than Boston Red Sox great Ted Williams, who humbly considered himself the greatest hitter who ever lived, declared in his book *My Turn at Bat*, declared, "If I had to pick an All-Star Team of those players that I have played with and against, limiting it to the American League, [Joe] DiMaggio would certainly head it up. With him in the outfield, I would go with [Mickey] Mantle and Al Kaline."

When Williams, who batted .406 in 1941, was asked in the mid-1950s who the next big-leaguer to hit .400 might be, he named two: Mickey Mantle and Al Kaline.

Nevertheless, in 2002, as Kaline was beginning his 50th season with the Tigers organization, I asked him what he would change if he could change one thing about his Hall of Fame career.

"I should have been a better ballplayer than I was," confessed the man who played in more games (2,834), hit more home runs (399), and drew more walks (1,277) than any other Tiger who ever lived.

"I had a lot of tools. I could do a lot of things. I think losing with bad teams, year in and year out, knowing every year, going into September, that we had no chance to win, finishing down near the bottom every year, beat me down.

"If you look at my record, when I played in All-Star Games, I did really well. When I played in the World Series, I did really well. If I was challenged, I usually did pretty well.

"Maybe it was my fault," he humbly suggested. "Maybe if I had elevated my game, we would have been a little bit better."

Suddenly, it dawned on me: Al Kaline, the greatest player to don a Detroit Tigers uniform in the last half-century, was actually apologizing for his stellar Hall of Fame career.

Kaline never dazzled anyone with his dialogue. He was never a guy who lit up a room simply by walking through the door.

He wasn't colorful like his teammate and close friend Norm Cash. He wasn't controversial like pitcher Denny McLain. He wasn't cantankerous like Ty Cobb or powerful like Hank Greenberg. In fact, Al was barely quotable, especially in his early years.

Kaline believed that playing the game well, and playing it the right way, should be enough. Al didn't wear an earring or dangle bling around his neck. He never had a posse. His life was never a burlesque, never a freak show. Kaline made certain of that; that wasn't his style.

"You know how much I hate talking about myself," he protested when I first approached him a couple of years ago with the idea of writing his first and only complete biography.

"I've had a pretty boring life, really," Al insisted.

And he was right. Which is precisely what makes his story so special.

Kaline never wowed anybody with his physique. In 1964 *Sports Illustrated*'s Jack Olsen noted, "Kaline is one of the last of an almost prehistoric type of ballplayer, the kid who makes it, not because of physique, but in spite of it."

Al was hardly a hardy specimen. He was born with a bone disease known as osteomyelitis. When little Al was eight years old, a surgeon removed a two-inch piece of bone from his left foot, leaving it scarred and permanently deformed. It would haunt Al throughout much of his career.

But Kaline largely suffered in silence. Few ever knew that the man who hit a baseball so consistently, who ran the bases so well and so fast, and who roamed right field with such excellence and grace was playing on a crippled, often painful left foot.

Kaline didn't resort to performance-enhancing substances that are so much in the news today—although there certainly were times, coming back from his myriad major injuries, when he could have used a boost.

Kaline never bet on baseball—not on his team or on the opposition. He was never charged with perjury. He was never investigated by the FBI or called to testify before Congress. He never filed for bankruptcy.

Rarely did he argue with umpires, although he certainly didn't always agree with their calls. "He was a gentleman," umpire Larry McCoy once said. "It would have to be a real borderline pitch for him to even turn his head."

As Al himself noted during his acceptance speech when he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1980, "If there is one accomplishment for which I am particularly proud, it is that I've always served baseball to the best of my ability. Never have I deliberately done anything to discredit the game, the Tigers, or my family."

In 1973 Kaline received the Roberto Clemente Award, presented annually by the commissioner to the player who best exemplifies baseball, on and off the field. He also received the Bill Slocum Award from the New York Baseball Writers for "long and meritorious service to baseball."

Kaline was special. He was unique.

Can you imagine a star player today waiting 15 years to get to the World Series, then telling his manager—and the media—to keep him on the bench because the younger guys on the team, guys who hadn't paid anywhere near the dues that he had paid, deserved to play more than he did?

Can you imagine a skinny kid who was supposedly all glove and no bat suddenly leading the league in hitting at the tender age of 20?

Can you imagine any of today's mega-millionaire ballplayers turning down a salary of $100,000 a year, as Kaline did prior to the 1971 season, informing management that he didn't believe he deserved that much money?

Of course, none of today's players would ever think of accepting a $100,000 contract. Today the rawest and most unready rookie makes four times that amount simply for showing up and taking up space on the bench. The Yankees' Alex Rodriguez makes more than that every time he pulls on his pin-striped pants.

Sitting in the Tigers dugout, watching the team's budding 26-year-old superstar, Miguel Cabrera, clown around with his teammates during batting practice before a game in 2009, I asked Al if he could imagine what it must be like to be that good, that young, and that rich?

Kaline smiled. "I knew a little bit of that," he said wistfully. "But not all of it."

Certainly not the money part.

Kaline, so good, so young, led the American League in hitting in 1955 at the unprecedented age of 20—one day younger than Ty Cobb had been when he led the league in batting in 1907—yet he never made more than $103,000 in any one season in his 22-year Hall of Fame career. And that didn't happen until his final two years, in 1973 and 1974.

"And I was very happy to get it," Al pointed out, "because I wasn't the player I had been previously."

Kaline was never able to pad his paychecks through salary arbitration. He was never allowed to sell his skills to the highest bidder on the open market as a free agent. He never knew the security of a seven-digit salary or a 10-year contract. With Kaline, it was always one year at a time.

When Al broke into baseball, nobody made a lot of money. At least the players didn't. And everybody worried about their jobs. Players didn't make waves; they didn't rock the boat. They didn't dare.

"I have no regrets about the money I made, and I don't begrudge the players today getting the money they're getting," Kaline insisted. "But I do object when I see a player who doesn't appreciate the game. However, in most cases they do. And the owners, obviously, think they can afford to pay those salaries.

"I've never been jealous of anybody making money. Money is great. Everybody needs it. But to me, if you love what you're doing, that's the important thing."

Then a smile spread across Al's face. He couldn't help himself.

"I could have been a free agent four times," he said, grinning, as he whimsically pondered that possibility. "Imagine, teams bidding for my services every five years!"

The money Al might have made if he was playing today would be staggering.

In 1955, still more than two months shy of his 21st birthday, Kaline won the American League batting championship. No player so young had ever done that. And none have done it since. Then Kaline spent the next two decades trying to live up to the image that he had unwittingly created for himself.

At first, Kaline was compared to the famous, or infamous, Cobb, who was merely The Greatest Detroit Tiger of them all. Al was also likened to Joe DiMaggio, the New York Yankees legend who embodied the essence of baseball elegance and grace. Such comparisons were both unrealistic and unfair.

For a shy young man who was uncomfortable around strangers to begin with, often afraid to speak for fear he might say the wrong thing, it was almost too much to bear.

A decade later, Kaline admitted, "The year of 1955, when I won the batting title, was the worst thing that ever happened to me.

"It put an awful lot of pressure on me," Kaline recalled. "I think the writers were responsible. They began comparing me with Cobb and DiMaggio, and the fans read it and they believed it. First thing you know, there was all this pressure on me.

"The comparisons were foolish, especially comparing me with Cobb. I hadn't been around long enough to be compared to him in that way, or any way. Cobb was the greatest player who ever lived. Nobody has come near him.

"As for me, well, they were throwing all this pressure on me, and I didn't think it was fair or even justified. I probably would have had better seasons right after 1955 if the pressure hadn't been applied. Instead, I had a hard time living up to the reputation others were giving me."

Kaline's playing career bridged the gap from the golden era of Al's boyhood heroes, Ted Williams and Stan Musial, through the glory days of his contemporaries—Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, and Roberto Clemente. In all of baseball history, only Baltimore's Brooks

Robinson (1955–1977) and Boston's Carl Yastrzemski (1961–1983) lasted longer with one team.

But Kaline was no Cobb, no DiMaggio, no Mantle, no Aaron, no Mays.

He never said he was. He never would. "I wasn't meant to be a superstar," Kaline insisted early on.

However, some of Al's peers disagreed. "There have been a lot of great defensive players, but the fella who could do everything was Al Kaline," declared Baltimore Orioles third baseman Brooks Robinson, who himself became synonymous with defensive excellence. "He was the epitome of what a great outfielder is all about—great speed, catches the ball and throws the ball well."

"You almost have to watch him play every day to appreciate what he does," observed veteran pitcher Johnny Podres, the hero of the Brooklyn Dodgers' World Series triumph in 1955, who joined the Tigers in 1966 at the end of his career. "You hear about him, sure, but you really can't understand until you see him. He just never makes a mistake."

In Al's mind, simply being the best player that Al Kaline could possibly be was always good enough for him. However, he would accept nothing less than that. "I was never satisfied with just average," Al said.

"I never worried about being patted on the back or stuff like that," Kaline later insisted, when I suggested his accomplishments had been underappreciated by some. "I just appreciated playing. I just wanted to be one the guys, even though I knew I had skills that were better than most of them. I just wanted to be one of the guys, that's all."

But that could never happen. Because Al Kaline was special. "He never really was one of the guys," recalled Gates Brown, the former Tigers pinch-hitter deluxe, who was Kaline's teammate for a dozen years.

And The Gator meant that as a compliment. "The rest of us, Norm Cash and myself and some of the others, we would be goofing around and laughing," Brown remembered. "But Al was always all business. He was always in the game.

"He took a lot of pride in his work. He didn't ever want to screw up. And he never did. He made everything look so easy. I would watch him hit those curveballs, and I'd say to myself, 'Damn, I wish I could hit like that.'

"The guy was gifted," Gates added. "He was just a helluva man."

Kaline never had a flashy nickname. His teammates called him "Line." Others respectfully referred to him by his uniform number, "Six." To his fans, he became "Mr. Tiger."

Today, Kaline is as much at home in the Tigers clubhouse as the organization's elder statesman, mingling with current stars, including Miguel Cabrera and Justin Verlander, as he was in the days when he lockered alongside Norm Cash, Rocky Colavito, and Harvey Kuenn.

It is there, in the locker room or in the dugout or leaning against the cage during batting practice, that Kaline feels most comfortable. In his heart and in his soul, he is still what he has always been, the only thing he ever wanted to be—a ballplayer.

The only difference is Al can't hit or run or throw anymore.

However, the baseball player in him will never die. The game is his life.

"I owe everything to baseball," Kaline once admitted with typical modesty. "Without it, I'd probably be a bum."

As fellow Hall of Famer George Kell, Kaline's TV broadcast partner for 21 years, once declared, "Al Kaline knows baseball like no one else knows the game."

No man—not tempestuous Ty Cobb, not Hammerin' Hank Greenberg, not underappreciated Alan Trammell—has ever personified the Detroit Tigers as well or for as long as Kaline has.

Al Kaline, the father of two and grandfather of four, is Detroit, as respected and revered at the plebeian summer picnics on Belle Isle in the middle of the busy Detroit River as he is at the prestigious, patrician Oakland Hills Country Club in tony Bloomfield Township, where they take their golf seriously and where Kaline has been an active, prominent member for nearly three decades.

"Everybody loves him—everybody," declared former business exec Joe Colucci, who first met Al in a pickup basketball game and who has been

his close friend for more than 40 years. "People laugh at us because we're together all the time. We just hit it off.

"I had a chance to sign a pro contract, too, when I was a kid. But my dad told me, 'Don't bother. You're not good enough. Go to college.' I was at Michigan State when Al won the batting title. We're about the same age—Al's four days older than I am—and I was jealous of him. I followed his career from the time he first came up with the Tigers.

"He is truly a great man," Colucci added. "He was a fabulous baseball player—but he's an even better person."

Near the conclusion of Kaline's playing career, I received a letter from a young lady who explained she was writing a high school term paper about Al and asked for any insight I might offer. I replied that perhaps the greatest compliment I could pay him was to say that I had never, not once, heard anyone say anything derogatory about the man.

Even after all these years, those who knew or know him, those who actually saw him play, and those who have only heard or read about what he did speak respectfully about the player he was and the person he still is.

Today, Dave Richards owns and operates his own golf marketing company. But he remembers how, when he was growing up in Ecorse, Michigan, in the 1960s, whenever he did something wrong or was disrespectful, his father would admonish him by saying, "Al Kaline would never do that" or "That's not the way Al Kaline would do it."

"And I knew exactly what he was talking about," Richards remembered.

Even from afar, Kaline set the standard against which young Richards and countless other baseball-minded Michiganders were measured.

Al has been a hero and a role model for generations.

"I never wished I was playing anywhere else but in Detroit," Kaline said. "There were many times when I wished I was playing for a winning team. But I think Detroit was the perfect-size city for me. I don't know if I could have survived playing in New York or Chicago."

But because Kaline played in Detroit, rather than in, say, New York, he didn't always receive all of the media attention and acclaim that he deserved.

"I got to be pretty good friends with Mickey Mantle over the years," Kaline recalled. "We would sometimes have a beer or two together after the game at the Lindell AC when the Yankees were in town, and he used to say to me, 'It's too bad you don't play in New York because people don't even know who you are.'

"Actually, I thought I got more recognition than I deserved," Al insisted. "Honestly, I felt I was treated very fairly. I had writers come up to me, especially when we played National League teams, and tell me, 'Gee, I didn't realize you were this good of a player.' And I'd always say, 'The people in Detroit treat me great.'"

In 1969 when Tigers fans celebrated baseball's centennial by selecting their all-time team, Kaline was, of course, included along with fellow outfielders Ty Cobb and Harry Heilmann, slugging first baseman Hank Greenberg, second baseman Charlie Gehringer (aka the Mechanical Man) catcher/manager Mickey Cochrane, third baseman George Kell, shortstop-turned-politician Billy Rogell, and pitchers Hal Newhouser and Denny McLain.

When the sports-memorabilia market exploded in the mid-1980s, Kaline, not surprisingly, became a popular autograph guest on the baseball-card-show circuit, particularly in the Detroit area. I was putting on such card shows at the time and regularly employed Kaline as an autograph guest at least once a year.

Al charged $2,000 an hour for his services, and his appearances usually lasted three hours. No matter how many times Kaline appeared, year after year, he never failed to attract a crowd. It was amazing.

Al made money, I made money as the show promoter, and the fans and collectors, whose insatiable appetite for autographs never ceased to amaze me, went home happy.

Kaline can sometimes be prickly when people approach him for autographs, especially if he feels he is being taken advantage of or taken for granted. Like most former players, especially those who never made big bucks on the ballfield, Kaline resents it when he thinks people are making money off his name and his fame by selling his signature.

But as long as Kaline felt he was being fairly compensated for his time and his trouble, he was fine.

At one such show in 1993, a 40-something fellow, who appeared to be on the verge of hyperventilating, approached the autograph table clutching a 1968 Tigers pennant in his trembling hands.

"Mr. Kaline," the fan asked excitedly, "do you remember me?"

Kaline looked at the man for a moment and said, "I don't think so. Should I?"

The man appeared deeply disappointed.

"At the parade, after the '68 Series, I ran up to your car," the guy gushed. "I was right next to you. I yelled, 'Al! Al!' You looked right at me and waved. You must remember."

Kaline pretended to study the fan's face for a moment, then said, "I thought you looked familiar. Yeah, from the parade in '68. You ran up to the car. You've changed a little bit. I mean, it's been 25 years. But, yeah, I remember you."

The guy was grinning from ear to ear. He picked up his pennant that Al had just autographed and walked away, still smiling. I swear, his feet barely touched the ground.

Kaline had just made this guy's day, his week, his month, indeed, his whole year. The guy would rush home and tell his wife and his kids and phone every one his friends. *Wait 'til the guys in the office hear about this*, he was surely thinking. *I talked to Al Kaline—and he remembered me!*

My son, Mark, who was sitting alongside Kaline, doing his best to speed along the line filled with fans and collectors who had waited, some for hours, to secure the Hall of Famer's signature, turned in his chair and stared at Al incredulously. Kaline sensed my son's puzzlement and his quizzical stare.

Kaline shook his head. Without looking up, Al quietly said, "Of course not." Then he began signing his name again, with the same smooth, distinctive strokes, for maybe the 10-millionth time in his life, making the next guy in line feel as if he, too, was the most important person in the world.

CHAPTER 2

"Life Was a Baseball Game"

Looking back on it now, from his seat in one of the executive suites high above the field at Comerica Park in recession-ravaged downtown Detroit, Al Kaline is more appreciative than ever of the fact that his parents, Nicholas and Naomi, who contributed so much to Al's development as a person and as a ballplayer, were both still alive and able to be present at the two crowning moments in his career. The first came on September 24, 1974, when he collected his 3,000th hit, making him, at the time, just the 12th player in baseball history ever to reach that prestigious plateau. The second was on August 3, 1980, when he was awarded the game's ultimate honor and ushered into the Hall of Fame, just the 10th man to ever make it on the first ballot.

"I've had a lot of different guys, Hall of Famers, say to me, 'You're so lucky your parents were able to be there,' because a lot of theirs weren't," Al declared.

Kaline was born, humbly enough, on December 19, 1934, the third child and only son of a working-class couple of German and Irish descent. They lived in a modest row house on Baltimore's blue-collar south side, a neighborhood more famous for its factories than its fine homes, where the smell of cinnamon from the McCormick plant, located on Baltimore's then-undeveloped Inner Harbor, spiced the air.

"My mom worked all of the time until maybe my last year in high school," Kaline recalled. "My dad worked all the time, too. My dad walked to work every day. From where I was born, it was maybe six or seven blocks. When I was in elementary school, I would hustle home to meet him for lunch. I would eat a fast sandwich, and then I would hightail it right back to school so I could play a little softball before lunch period was over."

The family, which included Kaline's two older sisters, Margaret and Caroline, lived at 2222 Cedley Street in a neighborhood known as Westport, on the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak, and not far from historic Fort McHenry, where "The Star-Spangled Banner" was born.

Suffice to say, it was not the fanciest of neighborhoods.

"Where I was born, I didn't live close to any ballpark," Kaline said, looking back. "I couldn't walk to a ballpark if I wanted to play ball. And I couldn't ride my bicycle there, because I didn't have a bicycle for a long time. I had to be driven. The closest ballpark was the one my school used. But it was about three miles from my house.

"When I went to high school, I had to take a trolley from our neighborhood first, then catch a bus just to get to my school, which was near Baltimore's Inner Harbor. And we didn't have a baseball field at my school, either. So, after school, we had to catch another ride to get to the ballpark where we practiced.

"My dad would have to pick me up after practice. Or I would have to walk home. That was scary because it would always be dark by then, and it was a bad neighborhood in those days between the ballpark and my house. In those days, the Inner Harbor was all wooden shacks, and they always warned us never to go downtown because downtown Baltimore was terrible.

"Whenever I walked home, I had to walk past a junkyard. That was where I learned how to run. Those junkyard dogs would be barking and snarling. Even though they were behind the fence, I would really be running when I went past that junkyard."

In the closing days of Kaline's career, whenever the Tigers would travel to Baltimore on a road trip, Al always made it a point to sit on the right

side of the team bus during the ride downtown from what was then known as Friendship Airport.

As the Tigers' bus passed Westport, Al would gaze out the window at the three smokestacks just beyond Cedley Street and say to his teammates, "There it is, guys, my old hometown. We lived right over there behind the power factory. A great place to grow up."

During the off-season, whenever Kaline and his growing family would visit his parents, Al would drive past the smokestacks so that his two sons, Mark and Mike, could see where their famous father had grown up.

"I wanted them to know that life was not always easy," Kaline explained. "I wanted them to know you had to work hard to get ahead."

Hard work was a way of life on the Kaline household. Al's dad worked in a broom factory while his mom worked in a whiskey distillery by day and scrubbed floors in a downtown Baltimore office building a couple nights a week.

For fun, the elder Kaline had played baseball as a young man. Nicholas and his two brothers, Bib and Fred, Al's uncles, along with his grandfather, Philip, had all played semipro ball. They had all been catchers. Kaline's dad and two uncles were convinced that young Al, with his strong arm, would make a fine pitcher.

Since before the days of Babe Ruth, another of Baltimore's famous native sons, that has been the preferred position of the best ballplayers in the land. "I guess all kids interested in baseball first want to be pitchers," Kaline said.

By the time Al was eight, his dad was squatting behind an imaginary home plate, holding up his catcher's mitt and urging his son to fire the ball into it, harder and harder and harder.

Al loved it.

"Dad used to teach me how to throw the different pitches," Kaline recalled. "By the time I was nine, I knew how to throw a fastball, a curve, and a change-up. A few years later, I pitched for Westport Grammar School and won 10 straight games. That gave me a thrill. Ten thrills, I guess."