

# Orel Hershiser and Kirk Gibson

May 12, 1990—Orel Hershiser and Kirk Gibson were the heroes of the 1988 World Series. Now at ages thirty-one and thirty-two, respectively, their careers may well be finished. The same gung-ho attitude that brought them glory then has made them casualties now.

Hershiser's right shoulder and Gibson's right knee are wrecks. Doctors aren't sure either will ever play again. If they do, they may be shadows of the men who were the National League's Cy Young Award winner and Most Valuable Player just two years ago.

The Bulldog and the Caveman have paid a high price for their utterly unselfish styles. They repeatedly risked their careers for their team, the Los Angeles Dodgers. And, it now seems, they have lost their careers—five to ten years too soon. At least we can pay tribute to their sacrifice. They treated the baseball diamond as though it were a field of honor, not a business office. Maybe that's naive or unnecessary, but you've gotta give 'em points for style.

One looked like an angel, the other like a Hell's Angel. But underneath they were pretty much the same. Throwbacks. Dive-on-the-hand-grenade kind of guys.

Gibson didn't "play hurt." He played to *get* hurt. You can't be that hell-bent and not break. Then he usually kept playing after he got hurt. Gibby's one at bat in the '88 Series was merely the apotheosis of his whole career progression. He dragged himself out of an ice vat and could barely walk to the plate. But he hit one of the most famous home runs in history.

Hershiser always answered the bell, no matter what. Sometimes he even heard a bell when others heard nothing. When his arm finally blew up last month—ligaments, rotator cuff, the whole ball of wax—he had not missed a start in 195 turns. That's more than five years of "Doesn't hurt too bad, Skip. I can make it." Mike Flanagan, released by Toronto this week, once pulled the same Iron Man stunt. With similar results. He was never the same.

In the '88 playoffs, Hershiser started three games against the Mets and saved another when he volunteered for relief duty. Finally—and this is the part that's still hard to believe—Orel snuck into the bullpen to warm up in yet another game. Tommy Lasorda about fainted when he saw who was throwing. (And Tommy has burned out some good arms in his time.) Nobody does stuff like that. Not since Grover Cleveland Alexander anyway. Your agent's liable to have a coronary in front of his 50-inch projection TV beside his Olympic-size pool.

Now it seems that '88 was just a preamble for Hershiser, a way of preparing us to understand what he did this spring. Orel's surgery probably will become the Symbol of the 1990 Lockout. Hershiser is the most visible victim of the owners' greedy labor strategy and the union's pointless "don't workout without a contract" dictum.

As the Dodgers' player rep, Hershiser felt honor-bound to the union not to throw a pitch until an agreement was signed. But he also felt honor-bound by his contract to get ready in just three weeks so he could pitch on Opening Day to please the Dodgers.

Maybe Hershiser forgot an artist's responsibility to honor his own gift.

Just nineteen months ago, Orel and Kirk were the nation's twin symbols of hard-nosed hardball. Gibson challenged walls and ran the bases with a Death to Infielders sign over his head. Hershiser got three hits in one Series game and found a way to slide into every base.

With the help of a few stuntmen, they won a World Series that will never be forgotten. But they made a devil's bargain, too. Without a doubt, the very attitude that gave them an extra dimension of lasting greatness also made them doubly vulnerable.

Gibson never really recovered from his last crazy playoff slide into second base against the Mets. Of course, that final awkward twist was just the straw that broke his camel's back.

Naturally, Gibson tried to come back too quickly to start the '89 season. Everybody knew it and told him so. But Gibson was too macho not to try and the Dodgers were too weak to tell him no.

Gibson made it for Opening Day of '89, just as Hershiser did in '90. But before April was over, Gibson was on the disabled list for a month. Then, after just 253 at-bats (and a .213 average), he was back on the shelf in July for the rest of the year. To date, his knee still doesn't work properly, at least not when he tries to run full bore. And the former All-Big Ten end won't play any other way. So, he may decide never to play again. Put it this way, he'll never resemble Kirk Gibson again.

How often and how badly did Gibson hurt himself? In eleven seasons, he played in only 1,114 games. He was on the disabled list seven times for a total of fifty-five weeks. No minor injuries for Capt. Kirk. Someday it's going to seem implausible that Gibson could have been so famous. He never hit 30 homers, had 100 RBI, or batted .300 for a full year. Career RBI: 603. Keith Moreland had more.

Hershiser's last win was his 100th. Not 300—just 100. Doctors say he may return next year, thanks to a new procedure that allowed repair of his stretched ligaments, torn rotator cuff, and damaged anterior labrum without any muscles being cut. Nonetheless, even Hershiser says he's doubtful he'll pitch again.

Someday, we're going to be asked to explain our powerful feelings and our exaggerated respect for these two fellows whose place in the hierarchy of baseball statistics is so tiny.

After all, next to Gibson's name in *Who's Who in Baseball* there is not a single asterisk—he never led any league in anything. Except heart.

Hershiser won 20 games only once and never led the National League in ERA or strikeouts. (Come on, how good could he really have been?) Thank goodness Hershiser has those 59 straight scoreless innings to frame his name.

For once in a baseball discussion, we'll be forced to say: "Forget stats. You don't measure these men that way."

But how do you measure them? How do you convince a skeptic that one October, done properly, can stand for as much as a twenty-year career full of records and awards? How do you make it sound convincing, not dumb, when you say: "They played to win, at all costs. They played for the glory of one heroic moment, not for the money."

How are we going to convince the next generation that, in the case of the baby-faced Bulldog and the stubble-bearded Caveman, you just had to be there to do them justice?