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kirby puckett 1960-2006

Baseball tale of joy sank into a story of tragedy

• SOUHAN FROM A1

He chattered in the clubhouse and in the batting cage and all through that day's spring training game, getting two hits off Atlanta legend Greg Maddux and calling to him from second base. "How you doin', Picasso?" Maddux laughed. Puckett laughed harder, because he felt as good as he ever had.

Puckett had worked out with a personal trainer that winter for the first time in his career, adding tone to an upper body that already boasted baseball's beefiest forearms.

He left the Twins clubhouse that day needing everyone in his path, reminding everyone why he was the best leader ever to pay Minnesota state income taxes.

About 12 hours later he woke up next to his wife and asked why he couldn't see her.

The Twins were scheduled to break camp that day. Puckett went to the ballpark with his bags packed and talked to his manager, Tom Kelly, who walked into the coaches room and had his understated manner misunderstood.

"We've got problems, boys," Kelly said. "Puck can't see out of his right eye."

A coach asked if Puckett had tried eyedrops.

Kelly frowned and said, "This is serious, boys. I mean, Puck can't see out of his right eye."

In July of '96, Puckett underwent career-ending eye surgery and, at a news conference at which almost everyone but Puckett cried, he told us, "Tomorrow is not promised to any of us."

For the rest of his life, Puckett's tomorrows served as painful reminders of his yesterdays.

He became our Roy Hobbs, our King Lear.

Shakespeare didn't write tragedies about the middle class. He toppled monarchs, and if ever Minnesota enjoyed the presence of sporting royalty, it was in the cubist form of Puck.

It was Puck who made possible Minnesota's two most celebrated pro sports championships — the 'Twins' World Series victories in 1987 and '91. Puckett won the pivotal Game 6 of the '91 Series with the catch and blast that let the nation in on our little secret.

Before his glaucoma, Puckett could do no wrong in the eyes of Minnesotans, in the eyes of a nation of baseball fans. He had survived Chicago's projects to become a symbol of hustle and determination. After that morning, life became harder for Puckett than sustained silence.

A man of enormous appetites who took refuge and delight in the boys-will-be-boys world of the big-league baseball clubhouse, who treated the world like a postgame buffet, Puckett struggled to replace the heady mix of bonhomie and support that baseball had always provided.

He became a Twins vice president. That didn't work out.

His wife divorced Puckett, accusing him of everything short of violating the Patriot Act.

A woman in a bar cast an accusation. Puckett was acquitted.

His once-pristine reputation thus stained, the man known as much for his smile as his swing became, in terms of the Minnesota public, a recluse.

He and the Twins couldn't agree on a new role for him in the organization. He left Minnesota, settling in Scottsdale, Ariz., seemingly happy enough, but to those who idolized him, our baseball hero had become a cautionary tale.

Puckett gained weight on his already oval figure. Friends said he still flashed that spotlight smile, still broke glass with that high-pitched laugh, but no longer looked like the man who had hurled himself against the Metrodome Plexiglas, rising as if that famous barrier — what he called the "Puck Patch" — was filled with helium.

As a player, he worked incessantly in spring training to shed his winter pounds, to set an example for his teammates. As a citizen, he had no such incentive, no such outlet.

Our baseball hero had his Hall of Fame career, then his altered life, cut short.

"Tomorrow is not promised to any of us."

Puckett's poetry became prophecy, and that is the stuff of tragedy.

"I never forget where I came from," Puckett said when he was elected to the Hall of Fame.

The Twins drafted him in 1982,

and he reached the big leagues on May 8, 1984. He celebrated his arrival by getting four hits against the California Angels.

Puckett lone piled up quickly in 1982, when he led the Twins in hits as they came back from a three-game-to-two deficit against St. Louis in the best-of-seven World Series and won their first championship. He now had unqualified success to go with his unimpaired style.

"A 7- or 8-year-old kid watching the game would pick him out, and he just looked different," sportscaster Bob Costas said. "He had an affection for the game, and there was a kind of energy about it that was fun."

"I'm sure he took it seriously. You have to take it seriously in order to be a great player, but there was nothing grim about the way he went about it."

In 1998, the Twins again found themselves trailing in the World Series — three games to two, this time to Atlanta.

But Puckett went around telling teammates to hop on his back for Game 6, that he would carry them to victory. Then he delivered two significant moments.

First, he made a leaping catch against the Metrodome's outfield Plexiglas in the third inning and robbed Ron Gant of an extra-base hit, saving a run from scoring. Then, in the 11th inning, Puckett became the ninth player in major league history to win a World Series game with a home run, hitting a changeup from Charlie Leibrandt off the outfield wall and pumping his arms in celebration as he rounded the bases.



Kirby Puckett made few public appearances in recent years, but he was in Cooperstown, N.Y., last year for the Baseball Hall of Fame inductions. RICH PELLING - Major League Baseball via Getty Images

Pohlad: A sad day for baseball

• PUCKETT FROM A1

He led the Twins to the World Series 'Twins, Major League Baseball and baseball fans everywhere," Twins owner Carl Pohlad said in a statement. "Elbise and I loved Kirby deeply. Kirby's impact on the Twins organization, the state of Minnesota and Upper Midwest is significant and goes well beyond his role in helping the Twins win two world championships."

Puckett was given last rites and died Monday afternoon, hospital spokeswoman Kimberly Lodge told the Associated Press. He wanted his organs to be donated. In a statement, family and friends thanked fans for their prayers.

Puckett often said he played every game as if it were his last, and sure enough, on March 28, 1996, he awoke with blurred vision in his right eye.

He never played again. He was found to have glaucoma and retired on July 12, 1996.

For the next five years, Puckett remained a smiling fixture on the Minnesota scene, working as an executive vice president for the Twins in an ambassadorial role.

In 2001, he became a first-ballot inductee into the Baseball Hall of Fame with 2,304 career hits, 10 All-Star selections and six Gold Glove Awards.

Not all was as well in Puckett's personal life. His seemingly impeccable image began to tarnish in 2002, as details emerged from divorce proceedings with his wife, Tonya Puckett, who alleged that he had abused her and threatened to kill her.

Puckett said it wasn't true, but allegations from other women soon followed. He relinquished most ties to the Twins, moving his permanent residence to Arizona and disappeared from the public view.

Meteorite rise Puckett grew up in the Robert Taylor Homes, a housing project on Chicago's South Side. He received no scholarship offers, so he went to work after high school on an assembly line for Ford Motor Co.

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Members of the Twin Cities media gathered outside the Phoenix hospital where Puckett died on Monday after suffering a stroke the day before. RICH PELLING - Major League Baseball via Getty Images

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"You couldn't hear yourself think in the ballpark," former Twins hitting coach Terry Crowley said Monday.

"Kirby was on deck. The manager went to the mound, and Kirby said to me, 'If they leave this guy in the game, the game is over.'"

"... Puckett hit a home run, rounded the bases, and as I went to shake hands with him, he gave me a bear hug and said, 'Crow, I told you! That will stay in my mind forever.'"

Sudden end Puckett turned 36 during spring training in 1996 and continued to torment Grapefruit League pitching.

On March 27, he went 2-for-3, raising his spring average to .344. The next day, Puckett woke up and couldn't see Tonya, though she was sitting right next to him.

Three laser surgeries later, Puckett knew he would never be able to see well enough to play again. His right retina had irreversible damage, caused by a blockage of blood vessels.

He arrived at his retirement news conference wearing his white No. 34 jersey. He also wore sunglasses covering the gauze patch over his right eye.

"It's the last time you're going to see Kirby Puckett in a Twins uniform," he said. "I want to tell you all that I love you all so much."

The room was packed with reporters and Twins players. Puckett gave another pep talk: "I want my young teammates to know right now — when you put the uniform on, you put it on and you play with pride and integrity. The way that Kent Hrbek

plays with it — played with it. And Paul Molitor and Knobby (Chuck Knoblauch) and all you guys play with it. Just don't take it for granted because you never know. Tomorrow is not promised to any of us."

Fall from grace Puckett was elected to the Hall of Fame, on Jan. 12, 2001, he called it one of the proudest days of his life.

But the next year, as he and Tonya were involved in divorce proceedings, his life began to spiral downward.

In March 2002, a woman filed an order for protection against Tonya Puckett, alleging that Tonya had threatened to kill her over an alleged affair with Kirby.

That month, a St. Louis Park woman asked for protection from Kirby Puckett, saying in court documents that she had an 18-year relationship with him and that he had shoved her in his Bloomington condominium.

Then, in September 2002, Puckett was involved in a very public incident at a Boston American Grill in Eden Prairie. That time, a woman accused Puckett of dragging her into a restroom and grabbing her breast.

After a nine-day trial, a jury ruled Puckett not guilty of false imprisonment, fifth-degree criminal sexual conduct and fifth-degree assault.

He relinquished his role as Twins executive vice president. The team, which retired Puckett's jersey in 1997, tried maintaining ties to him, but he continued to withdraw.

When friends saw him, they grew increasingly concerned about the weight he was putting on his short frame, with estimates that he was well beyond 300 pounds.

But for those who saw him in Arizona at Harmon Killbuck's charity golf tournament in November, there was renewed hope. Puckett had spoken of taking better care of himself. Recently, there was news that he planned to remarry in June.

And there was always appreciation of him as a ballplayer and teammate.

"He made me a better coach," Crowley said. "He made Tom Kelly probably a better manager. He made the mediocre hitters on that team probably a little better. He was a pleasure. He really was."

Puckett would have turned 46 on March 14. He is survived by two children, Catherine and Kirby Jr., from his marriage to Tonya.

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