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Kirby Puckett 1960-2006



At Puckett's first annual pool tourney.



Golfing in 1987.



Kirby in a TV commercial.



The smile was everywhere.



In full celebration mode, October 1987.

Bubbly personality allowed fans to connect

• **ICON FROM CI**

Played for fun

In an era of big money and big ego, the man affectionately known as "Puck" was a throwback.

"It wasn't about money," said former Gov. Arne Carlson. "It was just about playing the game. He loved it. And his smile just radiated."

Jim Dimick, a retired baseball coach at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., who was at the Metrodome on Monday to watch the Oles play an early-season game, agreed.

"Every day was a good day for him," Dimick said. "He played every game like he was still in fifth or sixth grade — just for the fun of it."

That he looked a bit odd only endeared him to many.

"He wasn't the 'Pride of the Yankees' type — some great, lanky, homespun hero type. He was this odd-looking little fire hydrant, and so happy all the time," said Karal Ann Marling, a longtime Twins fan and professor of American culture at the University of Minnesota.

He had chubby cheeks and a chunky frame. When he swung the bat, he kicked his left leg forward and sort of hacked at the ball.

He had thick legs, too, and when he ran to the fence to chase down a line drive, he looked more like a clugging locomotive than a smooth center fielder.

Sometimes, his head was shaved. Once, during that glorious 1987 championship parade through the streets of Minneapolis and St. Paul, he wore a quirky aviator cap.

But he always seemed to make the plays and smiled doing it, winning hearts and fans and more than a few games along the way.

"He was the most ordinary person you can think about in the universe, the guy who bags your packages at the supermarket, then suddenly steps into the limelight," Marling said. "You think 'Any of us can do it if he can do it.'"

Said Carlson: "There was a lot of us in him. ... He looked more like a catcher in baseball or an outfielder. But he had that confidence. You knew when Kirby was at the plate something was going to happen. And it did."

Got results

Over a 12-year career, all with the Twins, Puckett won six Gold Glove Awards, posted a .318 batting average and led the team to World Series championships in 1987 and 1991.

Often, he was at his best when the games mattered most.

His looping, back-to-the-Plexiglas catch in Game 6 of the 1991 World Series robbed the Atlanta Braves of a certain home run, and his lith-inning homer later that night extended the series to a Game 7, which the Twins won.

Fans admired his loyalty, too. When Puckett became a free agent and the Boston Red Sox dangled more money, he chose to stay a Twin.

"He always bounced when he walked," Marling said. "He always had something upbeat to say. He was like you always wished athletes were. It's like he just walked off the back lot and bounced into the game."

Carlson said much of Puckett's success stemmed from the fact that "he understood the relationship" with fans.

REMEMBER? SHARE IT

Have a special memory of Kirby Puckett? Tell the story in an e-mail and send it to fanforum@startribune.com. Please include your name, hometown and phone number. The submissions might be used in the paper and edited for space.

He was born in '60, not '61

Kirby Puckett died Monday at age 45, not 44.

The Star Tribune learned the truth of Puckett's actual age from Sean Hatlin, the team's former media relations manager who now runs the club's video department.

The birthdate of March 14, 1961, that appeared in biographies distributed by the Twins during his playing days is a year off, but he never was concerned about correcting the original mistake. That birthday appears on many Puckett biographies.

A LexisNexis search confirmed the truth: Puck was born in March 1960, which made him 45 at the time of his death.

LA VELLE E. NEAL III

Dimick remembered sitting near Puckett on a plane ride to San Diego in the early 1990s, when Puckett was headed to Major League Baseball's All-Star Game. At one point, a flight attendant asked passengers not to bother Puckett for autographs.

"But Dimick remembered, 'there was a steady stream of people coming by. And he signed for them all.' Dimick said that once Puckett got off the plane, a dozen kids chased him down, too. Puckett stopped and signed for all of them."

"He radiated personality," Carlson said. "More than that, he made it fun. He knew it was the highlight of his life."

After glaucoma forced Puckett to retire in 1996, his off-field life unraveled. An ugly divorce, with stories of alleged abuse and affairs, and charges of false imprisonment and sexual assault, of which he was acquitted, tarnished his image and eventually drove him from the state.

"I didn't want to even read about it," Marling said. "He looked so incredibly sad going through this thing. And that's the last way you wanted Kirby Puckett to look."

But Marling added, "I don't know that the good feelings toward him went away."

Reis, too, said to this day, "I don't know what to believe" about the dark side of Puckett's life after baseball.

"But from what I know personally," he said, "he's just a tremendous person."

Reis said that catching Puckett's walk-off home-run ball in Game 6 was "the thrill of a lifetime." Afterward, he went to the Twins clubhouse to give the ball to Puckett. From there, the two became friends.

Over the years, Reis said, he played golf with Puckett at several charity events and even hooked up with him in Cooperstown, N.Y., when Puckett was inducted into the Hall of Fame. While there, Puckett introduced Reis to everyone in sight as the "guy who caught my home-run ball."

"It's just how he was," Reis said. "My brother and friends were just amazed. They thought I was making up the story about knowing Kirby Puckett."

"But he knew me, and knew it would be important to me to make that connection. That's the kind of guy he was."

Richard Morley/612-473-4405



Kirby Puckett showed off his 1987 World Series ring to the Metrodome crowd on Opening Day 1988.

Visitors check in on Puckett up to the end

• **PHOENIX FROM CI**

Linda Molitor, Paul's ex-wife, showed up, as did Oakland Athletics coach Ron Washington, who played with Puckett from 1984 to '86 and remained a close friend.

After Puckett's death, testimonials arrived from across the country.

"Everytime I saw him, it was a bear hug and a smile," former Twins great Rod Carew said. "He really cared for my daughter. When she was sick, he put No. 29 on his hat to pay her respect. That was very nice of him. The guy just had a big heart."

"He reminded me so much of Tony [Oliva] when I first met him. That eternal smile on his face."

Eternal — that's a word Twins manager Ron Gardenhire might have used.

"The thing you have to remember is, Puckett didn't separate people," Gardenhire said. "Everyone had a chance to be his friend. You could have been star or a Joe off the street. It didn't matter."

Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig

offered similar sentiments in his statement, which read, in part: "Kirby was one of the great players of the 1980s and 1990s ... He was a Hall of Famer in every sense of the term."

"He played his entire career with the Twins and was an icon in Minnesota, but he was revered throughout the country and will be remembered wherever the game is played. Kirby was taken from us much too soon — and too quickly."

Players association director Donald Fehr offered this: "Kirby played the game with such passion and enthusiasm that he was beloved by players and fans throughout all of baseball. An icon in Minnesota, Kirby's contributions to the game and all who love it will stand as a lasting tribute to his life."

Twins General Manager Terry Ryan, who was in the spring training of his second year on the job when Puckett went blind in his right eye, said, "He treated everyone the same. He was a generous guy. He had a great sense of humor. He had an unbelievable personality. Whether it was a media member or a bat boy or the club-

house kids or the bus drivers or team-

mates, he was a fantastic guy."

Twins executive Jerry Bell agreed, remembering one of Puckett's most famous games, in Milwaukee in August 1987. "He had a big game, going 6-for-6," Bell said. "He took a home run away from Robin Yount, and we ended up getting into a fight in that game."

"We were on the plane, waiting to take off, and Puck wanted a beer. 'Can't do that until we get in the air,' the stewardess told him. Puck said, 'You got kids? Do they want autographs? Then I want a beverage.'"

Fans remember Puckett winning games. Those close to him remember his winning ways.

"There's too many to think about," Gardenhire said. "He brightens up the place all the time. You can talk about things on the field but, really, it was those moments in the clubhouse with him."

That's why, as Puckett neared the end, so many people wanted to spend a few more moments with him.

Staff writer La Velle E. Neal III contributed to this report from Fort Myers, Fla.