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Kirby Puckett 1960-2006

Memories of Kirby

"When I came to the big leagues with Seattle [in 1989] I watched Puckett and admired the way he went about things, the way he played and handled himself. I decided I wanted to pattern my game after his — be a good, solid all-around player like him."



Ken Griffey Jr.
Reds outfielder, to Dayton Daily News sports writer Hal McCoy

"I got to see him go into the operating room, that was it. I know he was fine [Sunday] morning and he felt like he needed a glass of water and that's when it hit him, he spilled it and that was it."



Ron Washington
Former teammate, in Sunday's San Francisco Chronicle

"He had all that energy but... he had that smile. Everything he did, he did right and hard."



Charlie Manuel
Phillies manager

"He was just 'Puck' I went on two caravans with him. When I was there, he was the face of the Minnesota Twins. He made everybody feel good. He had one of those personalities that when he walked in the room, he lit up the room."



Corey Koskie
Former Twins third baseman

"It's a sad deal. Even though he was a fierce competitor, he was a very likable guy. It's very soon."



Robin Yount
Hall of Famer, ex-Brewers star

"He wasn't one of those guys who, if he walked down the street, that you'd think he was a good player. It's like Lee Trevino. You see him on the street, and if he wanted to play me in golf, I'd think, 'Shoot, yeah!'"



"Same thing with Kirby. You look at him and you wouldn't think he was a good player, and he was a great player. He was the type of guy you wanted up at the plate with the game on the line. He didn't look like he could run, and he could run like a deer. He didn't look like he could hit with power, and he could hit with real power. He could throw as good as anybody. He was just a great player."

George Brett
Former Royals third baseman and Hall of Famer

REACTION FROM FLORIDA



Former Twins greats Tony Oliva, left, and Rod Carew watch players go through drills Monday in Florida. Players and coaches learned of Kirby Puckett's death in Arizona later in the day.

Heavy-hearted Twins play on, as youngsters carry the load

● Ron Gardenhire and Torii Hunter stayed behind, but the rest of the Twins stuck to the baseball schedule and played through their grief.

By JOE CHRISTENSEN
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BRADENTON, Fla. — The song came right on cue, blaring down from the loudspeakers, right before the spring training game the Twins played on the day Kirby Puckett died.

With sunshine splashing down on McKelvie Field, the Pittsburgh Pirates ran to their positions, the Twins started twirling their bats, and there it was — John Fogerty singing, "Put me in, coach... Look at me, I can be, center field."

Manager Ron Gardenhire, who had been a coach under Tom Kelly for the final six years of Puckett's career, decided this was one trip he couldn't make.

"Gardy was already having a tough time emotionally [Sunday]," Liddle said. "As we got more news this morning about the situation, Gardy just finally said, 'I'm not in the mood. I can't go today.'"

"So he told me to take over and

do the best we can."

Torii Hunter, another close Puckett companion, also missed the trip.

"It's been tough, just seeing some of the faces in the clubhouse," infielder Nick Punto said. "It's almost like the life's been drained out of [the other players], too. Seeing Torii Hunter — it made me emotional just seeing how shook he was."

But despite their sorrow, the Twins did some of the things they do best against the Pirates. They played fundamentally sound defense, except for an error by third baseman Tony Batista in the third inning.

And they had a few laughs, too. With Johan Santana, Carlos Silva and Francisco Lirio away for the World Baseball Classic, the game offered another chance for Glen Perkins to make an impression. Two years removed from the University of Minnesota, Perkins turned some heads early in camp with two hitless innings.

This time, Perkins got a chance to start, and he quickly realized how tough big-league hitters can be.

Three batters in, it was 3-0 Pittsburgh, after Jose Castillo belted a three-run homer. By the time the inning was over, Perkins had faced eight batters and thrown 41 pitches. Under National League rules, Liddle and pitching coach Rick Anderson lifted Perkins for a

pinch hitter in the top of the second inning.

Perkins had told the coaches he wasn't looking forward to hitting anyway.

"We said, 'If we knew you didn't want to hit that bad, we wouldn't have started you,'" Liddle said with a smile. "It's just one outing. And today was just a day where he couldn't get anything over except the fastball."

The Twins took Perkins off the hook for the loss, rallying to tie the score in the seventh before Pittsburgh went ahead for good with an eighth-inning homer by minor leaguer Ray Sadee.

Later, the questions for Perkins, 23, were all about Puckett.

"It doesn't get any bigger," Perkins said. "When you think Minnesota, you think Kirby Puckett."

Across the clubhouse, Denard Span, 22, got ready to board the bus back to Fort Myers. Span was a first-round pick in 2002 and some view him as heir apparent to Hunter in Puckett's old position: center field.

Span said he still owns a Puckett rookie card, and he remembered the 1991 World Series because "he beat my Braves."

But these prospects really only know Puckett from the flickering TV images and the legend that has built through the Twins organization.

"These guys never really had the opportunity to be around him," Liddle said. "As I tell you, it's something they've been cheated on. Because he's something special."

Memories of Kirby

"I was there the day that Dennis Martinez hit him in the eye [with a pitch in September 1995]. He never really came back from that. That was sad in itself. To see this, it's heartbreaking."



Buddy Bell
Royals manager

"What an infectious player he was. He was one of those guys whose personality rubbed off on the team. He was a leader. A big-game player. He was a guy that was so loose that I would literally have conversations with him when he was hitting when I was behind the plate. I remember one time on a 3-0 count I said 'You swinging?'"



"You throwing a fastball? He was always that loose to where he could have that kind of banter with you. But certainly a guy you didn't want to see up there when the game was on the line with runners in scoring position."

Bob Melvin
Diamondbacks manager who played against Puckett as a catcher on six American League teams

"Kirby was the spark-plug that ignited fans' enthusiasm. Who couldn't look at him and not smile?"



Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty

"We are very saddened by the sudden and unexpected passing of Kirby Puckett. 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."



Don Fehr
Baseball players union leader

"Everybody loved Kirby. That bowling ball body and shaved head. He was a very likable man and played the game hard."



Butch Wynegar
Former Twins catcher

"He was bigger than life. There was something so special about the way people thought of him. His personality was infectious. He had that kind of effect on people."



Laurel Priebe
Former Twins traveling secretary

LA VELLE E. NEAL III

Hunter hit hard by news of his mentor

FLORIDA FROM CI

Puckett suffered a massive stroke Sunday, and surgery to drain blood and relieve pressure on the brain was unsuccessful.

Puckett, 45, died Monday afternoon at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center.

The day was spent with many Twins coming to grips with the knowledge of how the day was going to end.

And the red eyes around Hammond Stadium on Monday morning made their feelings obvious.

"It was so hard going to the park," said Hunter, whom Puckett had taken under his wing. "I couldn't think about baseball and could not get dressed to work out."

Hunter sat in front of his clubhouse sat somberly. Gardenhire, along with coaches Scott Ulmer and Jerry White, opted not to take the trip to Bradenton to play Pittsburgh. They moved silently around the clubhouse and spent the morning trying to get updates about Puckett's condition.

"Most of the people who were closely associated with Kirby stayed back," Twins General Manager Terry Ryan said.

"The players who don't make road trips must work out at 'Camp Stelly,' a lighthearted way to describe the

drills they must do for coach Rick Steimaszek. But he said he intended to "fly through this one," as he dealt with the news about Puckett.

Steimaszek and former manager Tom Kelly knew Puckett longer than most people with the club, but still tried to conduct business as usual Monday.

"I'M STILL IN A DAZE. I'M ALL MESSED UP."

Torii Hunter, Twins outfielder, a few hours after Puckett's death

"Obviously, everyone's mind was somewhere else," pitcher Kyle Lohse said.

No one took the news harder than Hunter, who dressed next to Puckett in his first major league spring training camp in 1996 and has gone to him time and again for advice and laughs. Hunter and Puckett often talked of one day playing together, which never happened because Puckett's career ended after the 1995 season because of glaucoma in his right eye.

"I'm still in a daze," Hunter said a few hours after Puckett died. "I'm all messed up."

As the day passed, Hunter, Gardenhire and others waited for updates. Hunter said former Twin David Ortiz called him several times and was too stunned to work out with the Dominican Republic in advance

of its World Baseball Classic game today. Ortiz was one of many opposing players saddened by the news. Hunter said Cincinnati Reds star Ken Griffey Jr., stopped by the hospital overnight to sit with Guardado and Clayton Wilson, the Wolves equipment manager who used to work for the Twins and is one of Puckett's best buddies.

News of Puckett's deteriorating condition spread quickly around the league. Phillies manager Charlie Manuel got

a call in the morning from former Twin Ted Uhlendorf, who visited Puckett on Sunday.

Manuel was given the news that Puckett was not expected to live. Manuel was so crushed he canceled his pregame media briefing.

"He was my favorite player," said Manuel, who coached Puckett in the minor leagues. "He was everything I thought a player should be."

Hunter was in a slightly better mood later in the morning. Rondell White, Tony Oliva, Rod Carew and Ruben Sierra were sitting around him, telling stories to lift his spirits. It helped. But only a little.

Several hours later, Hunter was at his spring training home, mourning the loss of a friend.

"I lost more than a teammate and a friend," Hunter said. "I lost Kirby."