

## **RICHIE HEBNER; ; THE MAN IS FULL OF LIFE - AND SO IS HIS HOT BAT**

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### **Document Text**

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Richie Hebner, who digs graves in the winter, plays baseball in Detroit in the summer. People who spend time in cemeteries and Detroit are either dead or contemplating death, but Hebner had 25 RBIs in the 20 games before the All-Star break. If that is dead, the Red Sox had better start scouting cadavers.

As a matter of fact Richie Hebner is very much alive and enjoying himself, which is his nature. A great hockey fan, Hebner once showed up at a Bruins practice at the Spectrum during the playoffs. Next day, Don Cherry was wearing a Phillies hat in practice.

The final word on Hebner's irrepressibility is that he has found the lighter side of Detroit. His story began when the Tigers closed their right- field bleacher section in June due to unruly fans.

"They reopened the bleachers and started checking everybody at the gate," said Hebner. "One guy shows up in a wheelchair with a blanket over his legs. They checked under the blanket and found a case of beer. They told him he couldn't take it in Tiger Stadium.

"The guy said, Well I can't get around like other people. I'm not gonna bother nobody."

"They said, You can't do it,' so the guy gets off his wheelchair, says To hell with you,' and walks off with the beer."

Hebner's laughter caught the wind over Mud Pond Wednesday, the last day of the All-Star break. You can take the baseball player out of three National League cities and dump him in Detroit, but you can't take the boy out of Norwood, where he grew up, or Walpole, where he now lives.

At \$250,000 a year, he has developed a genteel lifestyle. His house was designed and owned by the late Harry Korslend, Norwood architect. The living room has a high-beamed ceiling which creates the spatial effect of a medium- sized French chateau. Somehow, most of the windows face Mud Pond, which is neither muddy nor pondy.

There are two acres, room enough for a vegetable garden larger than an infield. Down by the dock there is a full-sized hockey net. Hebner was a hockey star at Norwood High, one of the all-time schoolboy greats of the area, and in 1966 the Bruins wanted him as much as the Pittsburgh Pirates did.

"I've always thought about what would have happened," said Hebner. "Back in '66 Tommy Williams was the only American in the NHL. I would have gone to the minors with Bernie Parent, Gilles Marotte, Derek, Glen Sather, Don Awrey. About eight or nine guys who made the big leagues.

"I played two years in the minor leagues and the third year I was in St. Louis opening day facing Bob Gibson. So it worked out well. If I had played four or five years in the minors I would have kicked myself and said Geez, I wonder what would have happened.' But everything worked out well."

In winter, the hockey net slides onto Mud Pond at the first freeze, and Hebner catches up on the game he left behind.

"As soon as it freezes I am right out there," he says. "Know what we do? We use frozen tennis balls. That way nobody gets hurt. You wouldn't believe the fun I had out there last winter. We play right down in the cove, where there's not much wind.

"Maybe I get a case of beer and we sit down there on the dock afterward. God. Last winter was perfect. No snow."

The hockey background shows, sometimes. A few weeks ago, Tiger outfielder Al Cowens attacked White Sox pitcher Ed Farmer on the mound at Comiskey Park, retribution for a beaning. Hebner plunged into the brawl.

"It was a good one," he said. "All I remember is that I was on top of somebody and somebody was on top of me. The bad thing is that we had three games left there. And then three cops came into the clubhouse to arrest Cowens. Sparky (Anderson) had to kick them out."

Cowens' revenge reminded Hebner of another story. Bob Veale, a pitcher for the Pirates and later the Red Sox, threw as hard and as wildly as Farmer.

"Veale's glasses had a black band and one day it broke on the mound," said Hebner. "The trainer came out and he handed him his glasses.

"Lou Brock was batting. Veale's first pitch went halfway up the screen in back. I mean, it looked like he was throwing to one of the writers in the pressbox. Brock steps out of the box with this funny look on his face and say Timeout. Get the damn glasses!" "

For Hebner, the All-Star break has always been a time for story telling. If ever it was a time for baseball, this was it. Through the break, he was second in the AL in RBIs, with 60. This, Hebner accomplished in 211 at-bats, while league-leader Tony Perez needed 300 for his 64 RBIs.

Hebner's production is astonishing considering his career average - 58. And that 11 of his 12 seasons were spent in the midst of ferocious lineups in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. The 12th, with the Mets in 1979, was Hebner's best RBI year, 79.

"I don't know what it is, really," said Hebner. "I know we've had a lot of guys on base. The amazing thing is that I'm seeing lefthanders most of the time. With our lineup, we don't see righthanders. We saw 28 lefties in one 31- game stretch. I'm hitting lefties better than righthanders. I had the grand slam off (Tommy) John. Last game before the break, against Toronto, I was 0- for- 2 against the starter, a righthander. Paul Mirabella, a lefthander, came in, and I got 2-for-2 off him.

"The thing about the American League is that everybody throws breaking stuff. I never saw as many breaking pitches in the National League. Every batter goes to 3-2 in this league. In the National, the pitcher threw his hardest pitch and you swung. If you hit it, fine, if you missed, fine. I'm a fastball hitter, but I've learned to adjust.

"But I can't get over how long games are in the American League. Somebody figured out that our first 40 games averaged 2 hours, 49 minutes. That's incredible. I don't think many games in the National League went over 2:15 or 2:20."

Hebner is not about to ask for overtime, but a person could get the impression that he is a hopeless clock-watcher. His marriage to Pat Downing took place last Nov. 4, and asked about it, Hebner said, "I've been married 249 days."

Precisely, 249 days, 15 hours, three minutes.

"You know how I know? That was the day the hostages were taken in Iran."

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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