

Batter up! Taking your game to a higher level

Ancient Egypt, cats were more than just house pets; in England, tea is more than just a hot beverage and in America, baseball is more than just a game

Michael Huff



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Granted, baseball was developed from a number of games brought to the United States by immigrants - cricket, rounders, stickball and others. And in spite of the fact that American football has a larger fan following, baseball remains America's pastime.

To gain a deeper appreciation of the sport that sportswriter Red Smith dubbed "man's closest approach to absolute truth," we spoke to former Major League Baseball player and Capital Markets Vice President, Michael Huff. Michael has not only learned the game inside and out, but is an articulate spokesman of the subtleties and nuances of an activity so precise, it has been described as a game of inches.

Raised in the North Shore suburbs of Chicago, Michael was not the star of his New Trier East High School baseball team, nor was he scouted by colleges. Initially, he was a walk-on, non-scholarship student-athlete at Northwestern University, where he majored in computer science and industrial engineering.

"My parents always said grades are first and sports are second," Michael said. "My dad was a great athlete and my mom was an Olympic javelin thrower and they made it very clear that sports are just a means to an end. They emphasized that you never know when you are going to peak in your ability or when an injury may end your sports career."

With a college degree from a prestigious university in hand and unlimited career opportunities, Michael elected to have a go at professional baseball. At the end of his senior year he was drafted by the Los Angeles Dodgers. The life experience of playing in the big leagues is a dream for many young men, so taking a shot at professional baseball was not a difficult decision for Michael.

"But it was kind of hard to take when all of my buddies went to work making \$40,000 a year and I'm

going to be making \$750 a month for only four months out of the year playing in the minor leagues," he said.

After playing in the minor leagues for five years and earning all-star status, Michael received the call that the Dodgers needed him in the outfield on the night of August 7, 1989.

"August 7 is my mother's birthday so my mother and grandparents were all gathered together in Portland, Oregon, expecting me to be playing for the AAA Portland Beavers and my wife was nine months pregnant with our first child in our apartment in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The game was televised, so everyone in my family got to see my major league debut. In my first at-bat, on the first pitch, a curve ball from (two-time Cy Young winner) Tom Glavine, I got a hit and received a standing ovation from the fans at Dodgers Stadium."

For the next seven seasons, Michael lived the life of a Major League Baseball player. He was traded to the Cleveland Indians and subsequently to the White Sox in his hometown of Chicago. During one season in Chicago, Michael played with Sammy Sosa and became one of the few people in the world who can boast he posted a higher batting average and slugging percentage than Sosa.

"That is my claim to fame," Michael said. "That, or the fact that the guys who kept taking my job in the outfield usually went on to be all stars."

In the winter of 1993, after he helped the White Sox to a first place finish in the American League West Division, Michael got a call, "Mike, we want you to help teach someone play the outfield." It was an ominous sign that the front office wouldn't tell him who the player was and Michael wondered if they were asking him to train his replacement.

"Two weeks later there is this guy, Michael Jordan, who announces that he wants to play baseball," Michael laughed.

So how was working with MJ, arguably the greatest basketball player of all time?

"I found him to be very pleasant, very genuine and sincere about his desire to learn. He tried hard, took direction well and checked his ego at the door, but with little potential," he said. "It's just very difficult to cross-over sports at that level of play and in that stage of your career."

And what is it that distinguishes the thousands of people with the raw talent to play baseball from the hundreds of professionals playing in the major leagues? Discussing the transition from the minor leagues to the major league, Michael commented:

"Of course you have to continue to develop your physical abilities, but there is a mental aspect of being able to play at a certain level day-in and day-out. You have to have the capability to find a quiet spot in the back of your mind so that you are able to perform exactly the same regardless of whether there are 15 or 15,000 people watching. Can you play your game against an all-star pitcher, or do you find yourself getting freaked out? Can you focus? Can you get at least one hit and maybe a game-winner after you've been on a bus for 14 hours going from Tulsa, Oklahoma to El Paso, Texas?"

In 1994, Michael was traded to Toronto. In that strike-shortened season as Toronto's starting left fielder, he hit for a .304 average and committed only one error (somewhat of a defensive specialist, Michael never committed more than two errors per year over a 351-game career).

In typical self-effacing style, Michael describes

himself as a "Punch and Judy hitter."

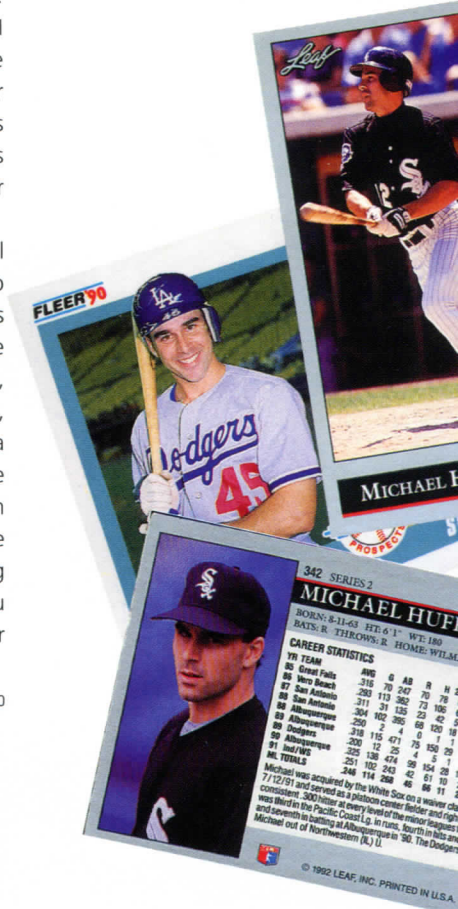
"I didn't have that much power so I was the stunt man or the guy who doesn't get any glory because he's not driving in any runs, but the guy who hits the ball to all fields.

"I remember facing (future Hall of Fame pitcher) Roger Clemens. My first at-bat, I hit the ball hard but it was speared by the second baseman and I showed some emotion at nearly getting a hit. My second at-bat I hit a hard line drive, but right to the left fielder. Again, I showed some emotion. In my third at-bat, I sat on a forkball just right and hit a line drive off the green monster (the left field wall at Fenway Park) for a stand-up double. In my fourth at-bat, Clemens drilled me in the ribs with a 92 mph fast ball. I guess I was looking a little too comfortable at the plate for his liking."

When asked if there is anything from his baseball career that prepared him for the Capital Markets group of Jones Lang LaSalle, Michael stated that it helped his people skills. "I gained experience speaking with people as a player's representative and talking to youth groups, church groups and corporations; being in the spot light, in front of the media; being in the eighth inning of a game that you are losing by one run and there are 40,000 people screaming at you and being able to calm yourself down, just as we have to do when we are giving a (sales) pitch for a big office building; and being able to relax and trust in your abilities and what you have learned so that you can convince a property owner that we are the right organization to hire."

Clifford Gately and David Petitti, Chicago

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Bowling for gold

Wednesday 31 July 2002 will live long in the memory of John Ottaway, a Systems Administrator with our Client Accounts team in Norwich, England. It was the day that he collected a gold medal as a member of the England team that beat South Africa 22-8 in the Lawn Bowls' Men's Fours final at the Commonwealth Games in Manchester. The bowls tournament at the Games involves the finest players in the world and is the pinnacle of any bowler's sporting career. The Commonwealth Games is, after the Olympics, one of the world's largest multi-sport events and has 72 countries participating, including Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Singapore, England and Scotland from Jones Lang LaSalle's own commonwealth. John, who "was over the moon" with his success, might take some time to come down to earth.



Christina Gassmann, London

John Ottaway (far right and inset, in action) collects his gold medal with other members of the triumphant England team