

Ball Four, the sequel

Bouton, Bombers turn page

JIM BOUTON ASKS, "Is it still the same, the clubhouse? I mean, the first time I walked in there, I couldn't believe it. There was this gray-green carpet, real expensive looking. I'm a rookie, a kid, and every clubhouse I'd ever been in you could hear spikes clattering. But this was like, you felt you should take your shoes off."

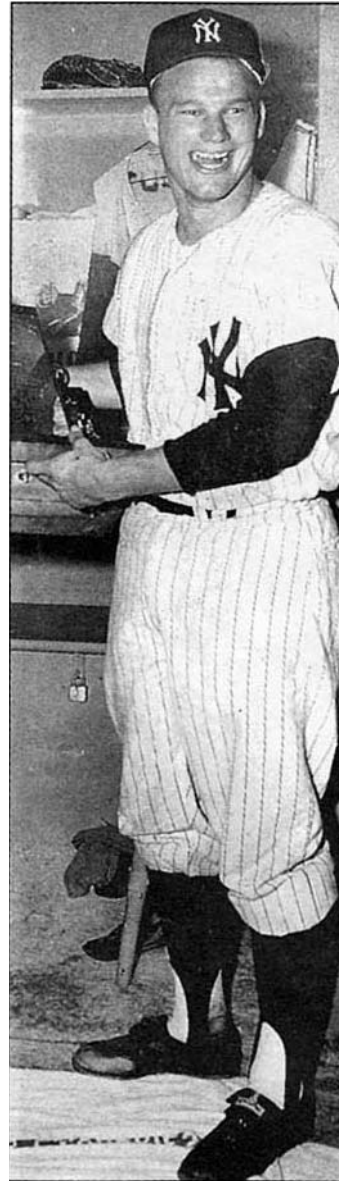
As if it were holy ground.

Seven seasons in the Bronx cured Bouton of such sanctimonious sentiments. Oh, he always loved the game, just not its hypocrisies.

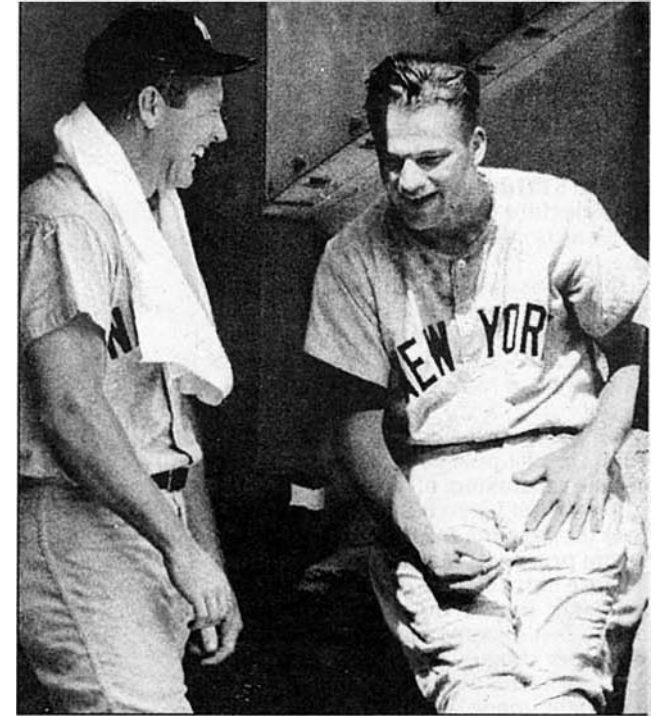
It's been 30 years since Jim Bouton set foot in the Yankee clubhouse, and 28 since his de facto banishment for writing the most original baseball book anyone had ever seen, *Ball Four*. But four days from now, Old-Timers' Day, Jim Bouton returns, 59, recently retired as a knuckleballer with Momma's Pizza of the Albany Twilight League.



"I was still playing with young guys, college players, some had been in the



Jim Bouton and Yanks were on top in early '60s, but hard times would soon hit the team and, later, 'Ball Four' would cause a rift between Bouton and his ex-mates, most notably Mickey Mantle (r. with Bouton) and catcher Elston Howard (bottom r.).



BOUTON'S YANKEE STATS							
	W	L	IP	H	BB	SO	ERA
1962	7	7	133	124	59	71	3.99
1963	21	7	249	191	87	148	2.53
1964	18	13	271	227	60	125	3.02
1965	4	15	151	158	60	97	4.82
1966	3	8	120	117	38	65	2.69
1967	1	0	44	47	18	31	4.67
1968	1	1	44	49	9	24	3.68

WORLD SERIES							
	W	L	IP	H	BB	SO	ERA
1963	0	1	7	4	5	4	1.29
1964	2	0	17	15	5	7	1.56



minors, and they're hitting with aluminum bats," he says. "I always said I'll play until I can't get guys out. Finally, the time came. Just didn't have the arm strength anymore. Even throwing a knuckleball, you need something. You can't just float balloons up to the plate."

So he put his ball and glove on a stool in the basement. "I figured I was all right," he says. "Then one day I went down there to get a tool and I saw the glove and ball, and it just broke my heart."

Not long after that, Bouton got a call telling him the Yankees wanted him for Old-Timers' Day.

Bouton gets calls like this every year; hoaxes, buddies trying to sound like George Steinbrenner.

"All right, knock it off," he says. "Who's this?"

The guy said he was Joe Schillan of the Yankee promotions department.

Oh, Bouton told him he'd be happy, even honored, to go. Then he hung up, confused, grieving,



Old Times: Jim and Bobbie Bouton lead (l. to r.) David, Michael and Laurie, whose death inspired Michael's plea.

grateful, weeping. "Just trying to sort out so many emotions," he says.

One thing he knew for sure, though, a devout belief based on a personal theology: "My daughter Laurie had something to do with this."

"She loved baseball," says Bouton. "Loved the game. Always used to tell me the Yankees would invite me back for Old-Timers Day."

Laurie was killed last year in a car accident. She was 31.

"She was beautiful and sweet," Bouton's son, Michael, wrote in a New York Times guest column last month. "And as tough as it is to lose a sibling, I cannot even fathom the loss my parents must feel."

The piece was a plea for his father's return. A philosophy student at Hunter College, Michael Bouton advanced a couple of arguments, the first being that Old-Timers Day holds some healing power for wounded families. The second concerned a sickness called spite.

"It took a philosopher to write that letter," says Bouton. Steinbrenner understood: Bouton's banishment was a baseball tradition worth banishing.

"Ball Four" was merely the first book to present players as people. Yes, Mickey Mantle hit homers when he was hung over. Yes, Whitey Ford, trying to hang on one last year, scuffed the ball. And yes, ballplayers could act like faithless fools on the road.

But to re-read "Ball Four" is to notice Bouton's discretion. "It's not like I wrote down everything I ever heard," he said. "There are no racial slurs, no anti-Semitic remarks. All the sexy stories are anonymous. It wasn't a snoopy book."

But it offended what Bouton calls "The Baseball Establishment," the owners. "Most of the guys I played with were high school kids who'd rather be playing ball than work-

ing in the mines or on the farm," he says. "There were no agents. Who the hell wanted to make 10% of seven grand? But the owners knew 'Ball Four' could cause them problems, and it did. I read passages into the record during (Andy) Messersmith's hearing against the owners. 'Ball Four' was actually accepted as legal evidence."

But Bouton himself was no longer accepted. The rumor was Mantle wouldn't play in an old-timers game with Bouton around. "When Mickey's son Billy died, I wrote him to say how badly I felt, how I remembered Billy running around the locker room in spring training, and how awful it must be to lose a child," says Bouton. "I never expected Mickey to respond. He's pretty shy. But about 10 days later, Mickey leaves a message on my machine: 'Hi, Jim, this is Mick. I got your note and I appreciate it. Also, I want you to know I'm OK about 'Ball Four.' One more thing; I want you to know I'm not the reason you're not invited to Old-Timers Day. I never said none of that. Take it easy, bud.'"

"I still have the tape. I was really glad to have it when Mickey died, to have that closure."

Looking back, the revelations of "Ball Four" were mild compared with those in Mantle's or Ford's autobiographies. Bouton's single regret concerns Elston Howard, the catcher he named as a source for a controversial newspaper story.

'ELLIE WAS THE GUY who got me through the games," says Bouton. "He was the guy who gave me my nickname, 'The Bulldog.' I remember him in such a good light. But I didn't give enough balance to his story. I had so much good to say about him, and I embarrassed him. I'm sorry for that. I just wish he would be there Saturday so I could apologize in person."

Elston Howard died 18 years ago. Then again, the way Jim Bouton figures it, he just might be there Old-Timers Day.

Maybe he'll be sitting with Laurie Bouton.