



BILL HAYES

BY IAN A. STEWART

When Bill Hayes was called up to the Major Leagues late in the 1980 season, the former first-round draft pick probably expected it to be the start of a long big league career. But just in case it wasn't, he made sure to squeeze the most out of his time there.

During Hayes' one month with the Chicago Cubs, the young catcher always got to the ballpark early, stayed late, and made himself a silent but ever-present fixture in team meetings. He put in even longer hours than the coaches, says Giants broadcaster Mike Krukow, a one-time teammate of Hayes' with the Cubs, extending his Major League experience one hour at a time.

"I think Billy figured he wasn't going to be around that long," Krukow says. "So he wanted to stick around as long as he could."

Although his big league playing career stalled out early—he finished with nine Major League at-bats—Hayes has managed to stick around the game for 37 years as a player, manager and coach, thanks to a genuine love of the sport and a humility developed over years in the minors. In the process, he's become a highly respected baseball mind and, as the Giants' bullpen catcher for the past 10 seasons, has become an integral part of Manager Bruce Bochy's staff.

In his own words, Hayes is a "baseball rat"—he can't be gotten rid of. Whether he's throwing batting practice before a game or warming up a pitcher in the bullpen, Hayes seems to take joy in the peripheral elements of the game. "Baseball's about the only thing I know," he says. "This is what I've done my whole life."

Says Bochy, "He's old-school. He's a lifer in baseball. He's seen about everything, and that's what we love about him."

Hayes' life in baseball started in an unlikely place: the prairies of Nebraska, where he went to a high school that didn't even have a baseball team. He moved to North Platte, Neb., from Maryland when he was 6 years old, when his mother remarried. Hayes was offered college scholarships as a fullback and linebacker in football, but knew he wasn't big enough to make it far in that sport.

Instead, he started to call college baseball coaches and hunt for his own scholarship. Eventually he was offered a spot at Iowa Western. When the coach who scouted him there accepted a job at Indiana State University soon after, he invited Hayes to transfer along with him.

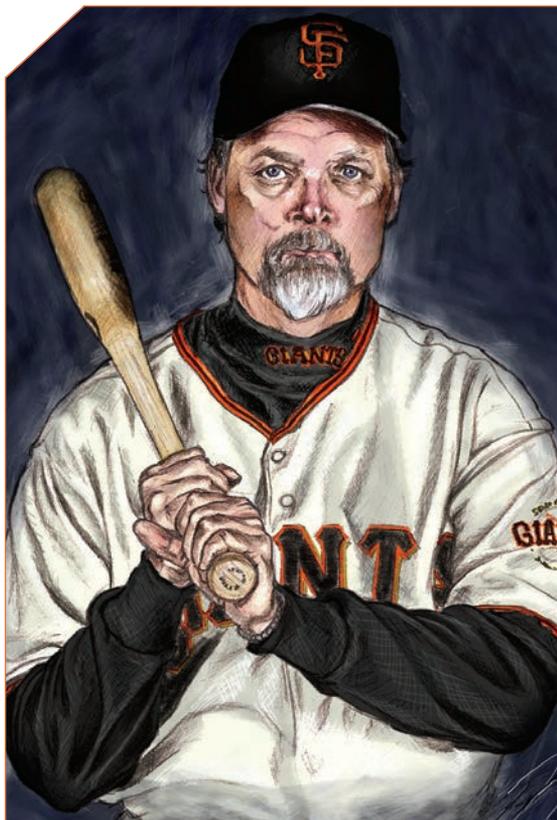
In three seasons at Indiana State, from 1976 to 1978, he fashioned a fine career. In his final season, Hayes hit .317 with a team-leading 13 home runs and

48 RBI (in 53 games), earning first-team All-Conference honors. The Cubs took him with the 13th pick of the draft—the school's highest-ever selection.

Hayes quickly progressed through the farm system and made his big league debut two seasons after being drafted. He played in four games during a September call-up in 1980, but his hitting never quite caught up to his defensive skills, and Hayes started the '81 season back in Triple-A. And aside from one more brief call-up, he spent the rest of his playing career in the minors. Until the very end, though, Hayes says he held out hope he'd make it back to the Majors.

"That concept of getting to the big leagues has to be in your mind and in your heart, and for me it was," he says.

In the meantime, though, Hayes developed into something else: a veteran clubhouse presence. Current Giants special instructor Shawon Dunston, who was in the Cubs' system with him, says Hayes never pulled rank or showed



CHARACTER SKETCH

▶▶ Bill Hayes has two daughters, Kirstyn, 23, and Megan, 20, both of whom played volleyball in high school. Kirstyn also played second base on two state title-winning softball teams at Arcadia High in Phoenix.

▶▶ Hayes is an avid outdoorsman. He spends winters fishing in Lee's Ferry, in northern Arizona, and hunting pheasant in Montana. "That's what I spend most of my time doing," he says. "I really like being outside."

▶▶ During Hayes' three years at Indiana State, he was classmates with a couple of other premier athletes: gold medal-winning Olympic gymnast Kurt Thomas and legendary basketball player Larry Bird. "They were just regular guys," he says. "One was a good gymnast, and the other was a hell of a basketball player." Bird played in one doubleheader for the baseball team in 1978, and hit a two-run single in his second (and final) at-bat.

▶▶ Hayes was surrounded by some big names in the 1978 MLB draft. World Series hero Kirk Gibson was taken one spot ahead of Hayes, while Hall of Famers Cal Ripken Jr. and Ryne Sandberg were taken later in the draft. "I think my scout got fired the next year," Hayes deadpans.

▶▶ Befitting his talkative reputation, Hayes' nickname on the Giants is "Gabby." Says Manager Bruce Bochy, "He's got some great stories and a great sense of humor. He doesn't lack for words."

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— Mike Krukow



jealousy toward players who were headed to the big leagues.

“He just welcomed me from day one and treated me like a man,” Dunston says. “He said, ‘This is the way we do it here. So go about your business, good luck, and I’ll see you in the big leagues next year.’ And he’s been my friend since that day.”

In 1987, recognizing his shot had probably passed, Hayes became a roving instructor for the Cubs, teaching young catchers how to call a game.

After two years in that role, Hayes took a job managing the Cubs’ rookie-level team. He followed that with three years managing in Single-A before being hired by Colorado, where he spent five seasons managing across three levels. In 2000, he was hired to coach the Giants’ Double-A team in Shreveport, La., and finally, in 2003, Hayes was called up to the Majors to be the Giants’ bullpen catcher.

This time he stuck.

Most bullpen catchers are much younger than he is, but Hayes’ wealth of coaching experience makes him a unique member of the coaching staff. He assists bullpen coach Mark Gardner and helps pitching coach Dave Righetti prepare pitchers to go into the game. “He’s a good guy to have in the bullpen,” reliever Javier Lopez says. “There aren’t many situations he hasn’t been in.”

Plus, Lopez says, Hayes can offer feedback and advice on what pitches look like from behind the plate—a perspective

pitchers don’t often get. “And Billy will voice his opinion,” Lopez says, “but he doesn’t chime in if he isn’t asked to. I think that’s one of the best things about him.”

Other members of the Giants are also quick to praise Hayes’ contributions.

Bochy, another former defense-first catcher, says he and Hayes share a similar perspective on the game, so he often seeks out Hayes’ opinions. “We both became better players when we retired,” he jokes. “Being a catcher, Billy sees the game a little different than most people. That’s why I talk to him a lot, because I have so much respect for that.”

Krukow says Hayes’ 37 years of pro experience make him an important figure on the team. “If you want to get the pulse of the clubhouse, ask Billy Hayes,” he says. “The old-timers are like that.”

And even beyond the free advice and knowledge, Taira Uematsu, the Giants’ other bullpen catcher, says he’s impressed that at 55, Hayes can still get down in the crouch to receive mid-90s fastballs. “He never complains,” Uematsu says. “And he throws a great batting practice.”

In short, Giants players say they respect the passion Hayes brings to the otherwise underappreciated parts of the game—shagging flies, blocking errant pitches in the bullpen and joking with players in the clubhouse.

“It keeps me young,” Hayes says. “And it’s fun. I’ll do it as long as I can—or until somebody has to come pull me up out of the crouch.”

Ian A. Stewart is editor of Giants magazine.