

Catching Up with former Manhattan Mercury Reporter David Smale



As a writer and storyteller myself, very often the story behind the story is much more entertaining. This was the case with sportswriter David Smale and how he got his dream interview with baseball great Hank Aaron.

We sat in what seemed like the freezer of a Dunkin' over coffee one afternoon, for a chance to ask my new friend David how he got into sports writing and books and blogs.

Chapman: David, you have been writing for a long time. How did you get your start? Was it with the Manhattan Mercury?

Smale: No that came later but, It's actually a funny story. Well funny to me.

Chapman: We will get to that. What was your first job?

Smale: I lived on Long Island, east of New York City, and I went to work for *Newsday*. Then I moved to Kansas City and worked for *The Kansas City Star* for a while before moving to Manhattan to become the director of public relations for Manhattan Christian College.

Chapman: Was that how you got acquainted with Mark Janssen (former Sports editor of the Mercury)?

Smale: Yes, I was trying to get MCC (Manhattan Christian College) coverage on their sports teams in the paper but with K-State, Manhattan High and so many other schools in the area it was tough to get any print space, but I was relentless.

Chapman: You're obviously a huge baseball fan, was that the premise of your first paid for story?

Smale: Yes, but I have to tell you some background if you don't mind. When I was a senior in college, I was snoozing through a freshman biology class (so I could send out resumes without including that grade), and I remembered only two things. The recessive gene facts for type 1 diabetes, because I am diabetic, and the history of what is now known as "Tommy John surgery"—when baseball pitchers injure their ulna nerve and have it repaired.

Chapman: No, I don't mind some science in sports.

Smale: My first interview was of a college pitcher at CW Post University who threw a perfect game in his first game back after elbow surgery. I asked him what the operation was like, and he said "some nerve" needed repaired. I said, "Oh you mean the ulna nerve in the elbow" and he then asked me if I was a doctor. Ha, not a doctor, just something I recall from college biology. It was at that moment; I knew that you could write from different angles and ask different questions, and it triggered my true love for sports writing and reporting and that style is reflective in my blogs and books too.

David Smale is an author of 28 books including The Ahearn Tradition (the history of K-State basketball in Ahearn Fieldhouse); THE STORY: The Greatest Turnaround in College Football History; The Purple Pinnacle (the top 40 athletes in K-State history), and Tales from the K-State Sideline (with Stan Waber), which were excellent reads for the Wildcat junkies when they came out.

Chapman: What was your first story with the Manhattan Mercury?

Smale: It all started in the summer of '85 when I saw that Hank Aaron, my favorite baseball player of all time, was going to be in Kansas City doing an autograph session at a baseball card show. He was with other players including Bob Feller, who just happened to be my mom's favorite athlete of all time. So, I had this idea for us to go see them, meet them, and write a story.

Chapman: Without the internet, how did you learn of this event?

Smale: I was listening to a Royals game on the radio and Denny Mathews (Royals play by play announcer) mentioned it. This was during the time when baseball cards were still popular, and these moments were a rarity. Today you can get anything autographed by anyone on eBay.

Chapman: Did you take the whole family to the card show?

Smale: At the time my wife was pregnant with our daughter and my son was 20-months old. My wife told me I could go if I took our son so she could get some rest. I asked my mom to go as well.

Chapman: Why Hank Aaron? I mean, he was great, but there are many greats in baseball.

Smale: I have actually thought about this a lot and have done a lot of reflective research including conversations about it with Bob Kendrick, President of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.

Chapman: I know Bob, Great dude!

Smale: Kendrick says that once you pick a favorite baseball player, it's hard to find a better one in your lifetime or you will always compare others to that player. In that time when I really followed baseball as a kid, Willie Mays and Hank Aaron were at the top of their games and Willie seemed to get most of the press and Hank didn't, so I started looking up his stats and more information and

became a fan of him because he was like a media underdog. I always rooted for him and even got to see him play in person once in Chicago at Wrigley Field.

Chapman: You wanted to write this story for the Manhattan Mercury?

Smale: Yes. I called Mark Janssen and told him who I was and about the show and asked him if I were able to get an interview, would they run the story?

Chapman: I tried to send stuff to Mark too, but he didn't run them.

Smale: He said, 'I know who you are and yes, I would love a story, but you won't get an interview.'

Chapman: (Hahahaha)

Smale: We went around and around. Janssen explained to me that he had heard about the same show a year earlier because Mickey Mantle was his favorite player. He couldn't get an interview arranged. "Well, there is no way you will actually get the interview, so sure. But it isn't going to happen."

Chapman: Because he was a seasoned veteran reporter, and you were not?

Smale: Exactly! At least not in his eyes.

Chapman: I can tell by your determination and tenacity that this went in your favor.

(Smale lights up, he is grinning ear to ear and can't wait to share the rest of the story.)

Smale: I reached out ahead of time to the host to arrange an interview at the press conference and they said. "What press conference?" I responded by saying that it seemed odd that they would have such famous people in and not have the media interact to promote it better. "We will get back to you."

Chapman: Seems like the usual run around. Getting interviews isn't easy, even as a hobby,

Smale: After several rounds of calls and always the same response, on the Friday before I finally got them to say I could meet Mr. Aaron next to the stage for 10 minutes before he has to go on. Then of course he was late and showed up about a minute before going on stage. I tried to start the interview, but they whisked him onto stage and told me that after the show I could meet him outside his hotel room. So, I was there waiting. And as they approached the room, they said "That guy is back! Mr. Aaron is tired, He is going to eat lunch and take a nap, but if you come back in about an hour or so, you can interview him then." So back after lunch and he was there. He emerged from the private room and the interview started.

Chapman: How was he as a person? Was he everything you dreamed of?

Smale: Hank was very polite and professional, but definitely guarded. I don't think he trusted the media. "You are very persistent," he told me.

Chapman: How did the interview go?

Smale: I started off by telling him he was my favorite athlete of all time, and it was going ok. He answered every question and remained stoic or just not thrilled to be talking to me until I proved I

really knew him as a player. I started asking him about how he developed such a strong grip because he used a reverse grip not knowing any better. That's how he developed himself into a power hitter. He appreciated that and began to even smile a little.

Chapman: Your mom was there?

Smale: Yes, she was sitting there with my son, and it was my son that finally made Hank open up and really be friendly.

Chapman: Did you get a picture and autograph, or a signed baseball card as planned?

Smale: When I told him I would like something for my son, he told one of his handlers to get one of his 8x10 glossy portraits. He signed it "To David Lee, my best, Hank Aaron." Then I said, Actually, I would really just like to get a photo of my son and you, so years from now he can say he met Hammerin' Hank Aaron. He then got down on his knee and called my son over and really smiled big. "Come here little fella."

Chapman: Did the Mercury run the story? Did you get paid?

Smale: I drafted the story on my yellow legal pad on the way home—my Mom drove. After I dropped her off, I went straight to them Mercury office and knocked on the door, but it was a Saturday and closed. Luckily Gary Van Cleave, the assistant sports editor, was there. I explained my story and he let me in to write it on one of their word processors. I had expected the story to run in parts without a photo, but they ran the whole thing on the sports front page and included the picture signed to my son by Hank. I wasn't able to produce the picture taken with Hank and my son that quickly, so they ran what I had.

Chapman: What was Janssen's reaction when you told him?

Smale: I called him on Monday. Asked him if he saw the article and what he thought. Mark said, "Yes, I saw it. I have just one question: Would you like a job?"

Smale covered sports and for the Mercury for a couple of years, mostly K-State women's basketball and some high school sports stories. Janssen knew after the Hank Aaron story, He was persistent and would get any story he asked for.

You can Find books by Smale at: davidsmale.com/shop or follow Smale's Blog: myinsidestory.substack.com

Henry Louis Aaron, "Hammerin Hank" played professional Major League Baseball with the Milwaukee Braves, Atlanta Braves and Milwaukee Brewers during his 23-year Hall of Fame Career. He died in 2021 at the age of 86. He wore the number 44.

Smale said the day Hank Aaron died was the only time in his 40-plus-year journalism career that he cried about sports news.

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Link to story:

https://themercury.com/features/catching-up-former-manhattan-mercury-reporter-recalls-hank-aaron-interview/article_9bb395f6-acfe-11ef-954b-3714621481de.html

Published November 27, 2024.

Royals' rally falls short, 5-4

ing on the double last July, ranns his record to 4-2.



Jim Rice (left) is forced at second, as Orix Concepcion looks on.

Chiefs' Smith hopes for banner season

By DOUG TUCKER
AP Sports Writer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP)—Jarvis Harrison and Rich Glover. Jeff Kinney and I. M. Hipp. It is an ennobling athletic mystery as to why so many football players reside at Nebraska last minute in the grade.

Thereon abound. One belief is that the well-managed program turns average athletes into college units of overachievers whose shortcomings are exposed in the pros.

There are occasional exceptions. Bruce Craig, a key member of the Super Bowl champion San Francisco team, comes immediately to mind.

Jiff Smith is hoping this season will see at least two more successful National Football League debuts from Nebraska—Steve Till and Mike Rosen.

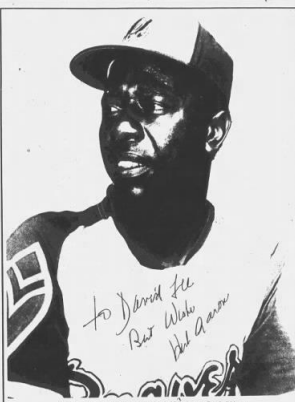
"I've never figured it out," Smith said of the puzzling history of Nebraska players and the National Football League. A third round draft choice of the Kansas City Chiefs, Smith spent much of his Nebraska career backing up the legendary Heisman Trophy winner

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Jeff Smith is trying to beat the odds in a Chiefs' uniform in 1998.

Sports



Henry Aaron - the all time home run king in Major League Baseball history

Seaver shooting for No. 300

BY MICHAEL MARTINEZ
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NEW YORK—It is a coincidence
scheduling that Tom Seaver is back
in New York, but it is fitting, too.
Twice he pitched for the Mets, and
he was sent away (once in the
expiring trade to the Cincinnati Reds
in 1977 and again when he was left out
protected in the compensation pool
in 1984).

Today, he will wear the uniform
of the Chicago White Sox as he tries
to finish his 10th career victory
in front of a capacity crowd at Yankee
Stadium, just a borough away from
Shea Stadium, where he brought
respect to a corner franchise in the
late 1960s. It may seem strange to
Mets fans who are expected to make
up a part of his home crowd, but
he is still a part of the Mets and the
history.

"I think there will be a very warm reception," Severn said the other day, anticipating the "creative" response he's been asked to expect. "I've been asked to come before about 1000 people. I've gotten two and stood out in my mad-on when I came back to the Maris in 1980 and the other at the 1987 All-Ireland Gaelic Games. I think after all we traded to Cincinnati."

There is little sympathy from the Yankees, who are struggling to stay in their own division race and who are facing more than 1000 fans in distraction.

"I think it's a great deal," said Bill Martz, the manager, "but I'm going to like to sleep him from getting it."

Joe Cowley, the ungrateful Yankee right hander who will face Severn, seemed unmoved. "It's going for his 3000th and I'm going for my 1000th," he said. "I'm not going to want to send Mr. Gorman out to get it, but hopefully I won't be at Yankee Stadium. I don't want to be a piece of

In some ways, the importance of winning 300 has missed Seaver. "I know it's significant," he says, "but I don't reflect on what it means. I'm not done yet."

Playing was a joy for Aaron

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Talks resume, but no progress

IN POINT BLANK The two-part series on the New York City Police Department's use of stop-and-frisk tactics has made its debut on Bloomberg television. The program, which aired on Tuesday, was the first in a series of four that will be broadcast on the network over the next two weeks. The program was produced by the network's news division, which is also producing a series of four programs on the New York City Police Department's use of stop-and-frisk tactics. The program was produced by the network's news division, which is also producing a series of four programs on the New York City Police Department's use of stop-and-frisk tactics.