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RETURN OF THE MILLION DOLLAR MAN



Thanks to the longtime loyalty of wrestling fans, minor-league teams can count on Ted DiBiase to draw a crowd to their games. (Potomac Nationals)

By Tim Casey

WILMINGTON, Del. - - At a Class A Carolina League baseball game last Friday night, former professional wrestler Ted DiBiase was scheduled to throw out the first pitch. Instead, he grabbed the microphone and took several bills out of the right pocket of his black-and-white-striped Adidas warm-up pants.

Addressing the fans in character, he told them he wasn't going to embarrass himself. He then performed a ritual anyone familiar with his "Million Dollar Man" persona would recognize. He pretended to pay someone off.

Standing near the mound, DiBiase turned to Wilmington Blue Rocks first baseman Cody Stubbs, who walked onto the field and tossed the ball to the catcher.

"Very good," DiBiase told Stubbs. "Check's in the mail, pal."

Within seconds, DiBiase let out his loud, infamous laugh. On the Frawley Stadium speakers, his wrestling theme song blared.

"Money, money, money, money, money," it begins. "Everybody's got a price. Everybody's gonna pay. 'Cause the 'Million Dollar Man' always gets his way."

These days, rather than paying people to do his dirty work, DiBiase accepts money from minor

league baseball teams that hope he can attract fans. He still can. In the past month, he's appeared at games in Salem, Va.; Frederick, Md.; Wilmington, Del.; and Woodbridge, Va. On Thursday, he's scheduled to be in Quad Cities, Iowa, for another game.

Throughout last Friday's game between the Blue Rocks and Winston-Salem Dash, hundreds of people stood in line to greet DiBiase, who turned 60 in January. He sat at a table on the third base line with a pen in his left hand and signed baseballs, ticket stubs, photos and other items. His signature, naturally, included a dollar sign below his name. For the entire game, a period spanning more than two hours, DiBiase didn't take a break.

"This is pretty much par for the course," he said. "I never see the game. I sign autographs for nine innings. It's grueling, but to the credit of the WWE and Vince McMahon's marketing, I can come here as a 60-year-old retired wrestler and get that kind of attention."



Friends Erik Ellison, 34, and Mike McDowell, 35, took a photo with DiBiase. They also got DiBiase's autograph and a laminated picture of him holding the "Million Dollar" championship belt across his right shoulder that his WWF character claimed was made of gold and diamonds and worth a million dollars. Ellison and McDowell haven't followed wrestling for years. Still, like numerous people their age, they remember DiBiase from their preteen days.

"Growing up, he was the bad guy you would root against," Ellison said, laughing.

DiBiase embraced his villainous role. After attending West Texas State University and playing offensive tackle on the same football team as future wrestlers Tully Blanchard and Tito Santana, he followed in the footsteps of his father, "Iron" Mike DiBiase, who discouraged his son from entering the industry. DiBiase ignored his father's advice and spent 12 years wrestling for promotions in the United States and Japan before WWF owner Vince McMahon called him in the spring of 1987.

McMahon had conceived a character and thought DiBiase would be the perfect fit, but he wouldn't reveal the specifics until DiBiase signed. He was afraid DiBiase would steal the idea and use it elsewhere. During a meeting, when McMahon left the room, WWF executive Pat Patterson gave DiBiase a hint of what role he would be playing.

"He looked at me and says, 'Ted, here's all you need to know,'" DiBiase said. "'If Vince were going to be a wrestler, this is the guy he would be. How hard do you think he's going to push this?' That's all I

needed to hear."

Later that year, DiBiase debuted as the "Million Dollar Man," an aloof, arrogant, rich guy with a bodyguard, Virgil, who performed menial tasks. DiBiase was asked to be in character wherever he went and perpetuate the myth. He flew first class, stayed in the best hotels, traveled in limousines and received hundreds of dollars in cash to show off his wealth. For instance, per McMahon's orders, DiBiase sometimes went into restaurants, announced himself as the "Million Dollar Man" and sent Virgil to all of the tables to pay for everyone's meal.

"Pretty good deal, right?" DiBiase said. "Unbelievable. When I left the office with my wife that day [after signing], I said, 'Pinch me.'"

Although DiBiase became one of the WWF's top stars, he said he got caught up with life on the road and the temptations that came with fame. He drank too much, took drugs, committed adultery and put his career before his family and religion. In April 1992, after DiBiase spent all night partying following WrestleMania VIII, his wife confronted him and told him she knew he was cheating on her.

"That'll wake you up," DiBiase said. "That's when I took the hard look in the mirror and went, 'What are you doing?' I really thought I was going to lose all of it. I really deserved to lose all of it. I pretty much accepted that, but I just said regardless of whether I lose my family or not, I'm not going to be this guy anymore. People have asked me, 'Did being that character influence that?' No. The character was the character. Stardom does things to people. It put me on a huge ego trip."

DiBiase stopped wrestling in 1993 after sustaining a neck injury, but he continued as a television commentator and manager for the WWF and World Championship Wrestling until 1999. Today, he is an ordained Christian minister living in Mississippi and runs the Heart of David Ministry that he founded in February 2000.

DiBiase began sharing his story and discussing his faith at small churches in 1994. He now speaks at men's conferences, halfway houses, prisons, churches, sporting events and other places. Last Friday night, he led a pregame chapel service for the Blue Rocks, just as he had done for the New Orleans Saints a few years ago before an NFL preseason game. He plans on doing the same for the Denver Broncos when they play the Rams on Nov. 16 in St. Louis.



Reflecting upon his career, DiBiase said he loved entertaining people, but he regrets the choices he made away from the ring. Like his father did with him, DiBiase recommended his sons stay out of the business because of the constant travel, crazy lifestyle and injury concerns. At first, they didn't listen. All three boys showed promise as wrestlers, but they are no longer active. Ted DiBiase, Jr., his middle son, left the WWE last August after the birth of his first child.

"If you want to be a star in this business, he said the amount of time that it demands is not worth it," DiBiase said. "I said, 'You figured it out.' It's the truth."

Still, thanks to his "Million Dollar Man" character, DiBiase remains popular and in demand. He has more than 200,000 followers on his Twitter account (@MDMTedDiBiase), and he earns money through appearances for the WWE at charity events and elsewhere and through signing autographs at conventions and baseball games. People recognize him wherever he goes, even though he's now older, heavier and wears glasses.

"I enjoy interacting with the fans," he said. "Wrestling fans are extremely loyal. I've always said that. Once they're with you, they're with you."

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