

INTRODUCTION

Ken Caminiti's world was falling apart, again, but he was in New York City trying to make things right.

The veteran third baseman spent his career waiting for this moment—he'd endured so many lost years on bad teams in worse uniforms. He was finally playing for a winner, the 1998 National League champion San Diego Padres. Going into the World Series. Four wins away from baseball glory.

But there was a problem. Those four wins would have to come against baseball's most successful franchise—the New York Yankees—in its most successful year. The Yankees steamrolled the American League in 1998, winning 121 games during the regular season and playoffs. No team had ever won that many games in a season.

But minutes before the start of Game 1, Ken's mind wasn't on the Yankees, or the lost seasons, or that night's pitcher, or his hitting approach. He was dealing with other problems. Ken was back to using drugs and surrounding himself with the wrong people, leaving his marriage frayed and fueling an endless cycle of disappointment and frustration and shame.

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Ken shouldn't have been playing.

His legs were failing him . . . but that never stopped him before, and this was the World Series, dammit. Bruce Bochy—the legendary skipper managing in his first World Series, who adored Ken like a son—wrote his name on the lineup card, as usual. What other options did he have? A hobbled Ken Caminiti

meant more to the Padres at third base in reputation alone than a healthy George Arias or Andy Sheets (no offense meant to either, but they weren't badass former MVPs whose scowls intimidated fellow players). There was always the hope that Ken would rise to the occasion, just like he had in Monterrey, Mexico, two years earlier when he got food poisoning and took IV fluid and ate a Snickers bar and, barely able to stand upright, still smacked two home runs. He wobbled as he rounded the bases that day, his accomplishments burnished into legend. Or weeks before the World Series, in the playoffs against the Atlanta Braves, when he slugged a tenth-inning home run to put the Padres one step closer to the Fall Classic.

History was not on San Diego's side. The Padres had reached the World Series once before but lost. The Yankees, meanwhile, had won twenty-three world championships on the strength of players like Ruth and Gehrig and DiMaggio and Mantle and Berra. One more title would tie the Yankees for the most championships in North American professional sports.

On paper, Yankees versus Padres in 1998 made David versus Goliath look like an even matchup. As if the challenge wasn't difficult enough for San Diego, the World Series was opening in Yankee Stadium, a concrete-and-steel cathedral that had experienced more winning than a two-headed coin.

The night of Game 1, October 17, 1998, was crisp and clear, 56 degrees—fans brought long-sleeve shirts and 60-grit-sandpaper personalities. The 4 and D subway lines shuttled the sardines decked in navy and white to 161st Street. The unfortunate souls who chose to wear San Diego gear could expect to face death threats and *Fuck-the-Pad-res* chants. It wasn't personal. It was the Yankees.

Red, white, and blue bunting covered the stadium's edges, a patriotic touch for the extra-special occasions such as the 1998 World Series—the capstone to one of major league baseball's magical seasons, when a home run chase between sluggers Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa enthralled the nation. The two men went on a summer-long testosterone tour, smacking dingers at a prodigious rate. Few questioned the home run display, and those who did were brushed aside. We were blinded by power. We were back in love with baseball.

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The drive from Yankee Stadium to the Bronx's Hunts Point section takes less than fifteen minutes if traffic is thin.

The direct route takes you east on 161st Street, underneath the elevated subway platforms, swerving around pesky double-parkers. The route twists and turns, and you follow it. Along the way, the rust and graffiti and decay become more prevalent. Duck under a highway overpass, and then you reach the 1200 block of Seneca Avenue.

If heroes are made at Yankee Stadium, people are overlooked on Seneca Avenue. A man sits on a stoop, scanning the passing cars. Children play in the shadows of surveillance cameras, throwing matchbox cars at birds. An apartment building is wedged in the middle of the block, identified by a stucco sign on the front: the ruth ap't.

On a different October day not far removed from his World Series appearance playing in “the House That Ruth Built,” Ken Caminiti spent his final moments here.

He could have been anywhere else.