

The New York Times

BOOK EXCERPT

A Memorable Chat With the ‘Voice of God’

In his new book, the former Yankee Paul O’Neill recounts a conversation with the Hall of Famer Ted Williams that involved some crucial advice: “Don’t let anyone change you.”



Known for being a stubborn hitter who would only pull the ball, Ted Williams encouraged Paul O’Neill to stick to his strength: Hitting the ball to the opposite field. Credit...Associated Press

By Paul O’Neill and [Jack Curry](#)

May 22, 2022, 6:45 a.m. ET

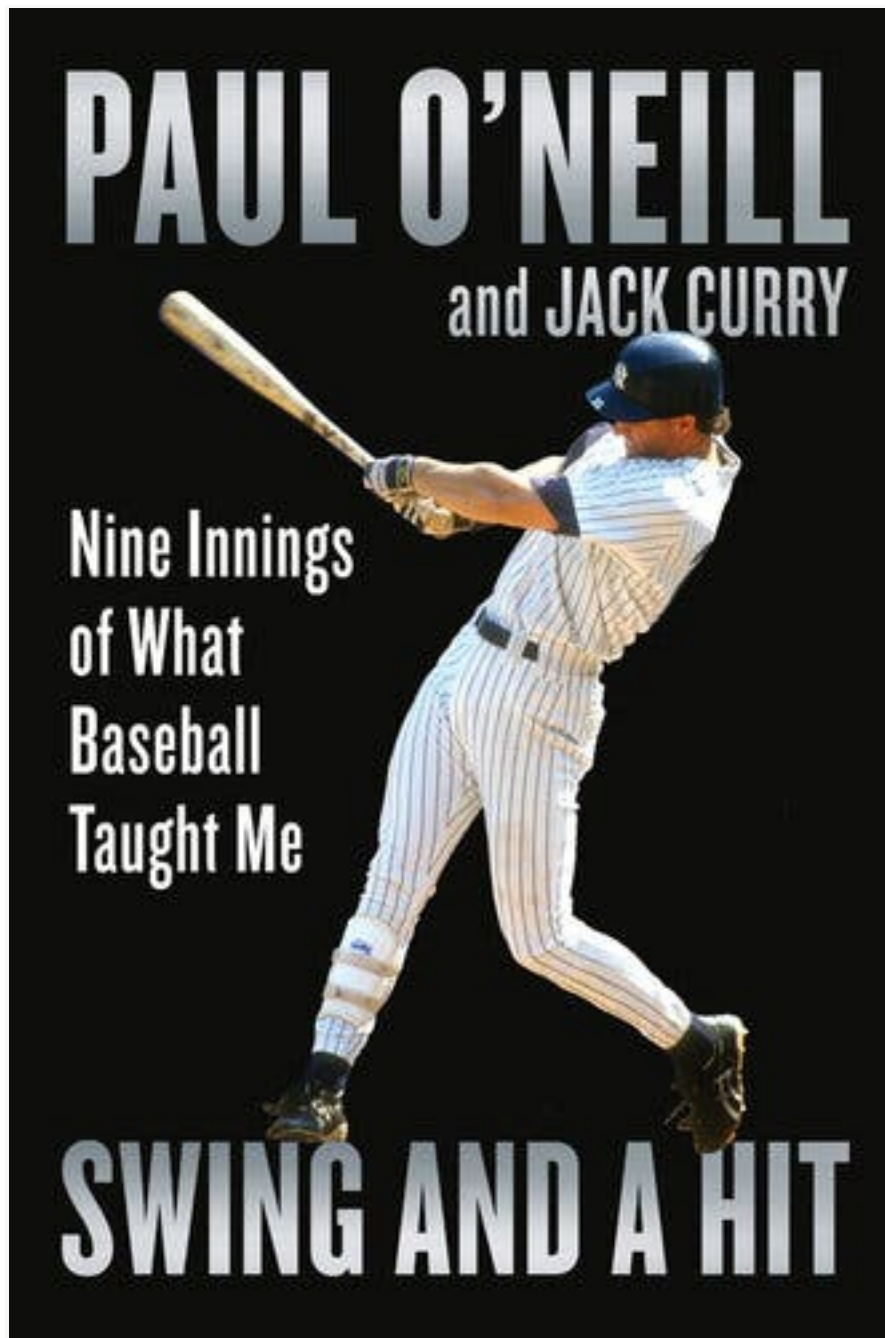
The following is an excerpt from “Swing and a Hit: Nine Innings of What Baseball Taught Me,” a book by Paul O’Neill and Jack Curry that will be [released on Tuesday](#). O’Neill will have his [jersey number retired by the Yankees](#) on Aug. 21.

His voice was powerful and direct, kind of like the voice of God. In some ways, he was a god. A hitting god named Ted Williams calling my cellphone, as stunning and as welcome a call as I’ve ever received.

Flash back to spring training in late March 1999, where I was methodically getting ready for another day with the Yankees. Each spring, I would sweat and stew and take hundreds of swings as I searched for a swing that I could confidently carry into the season. But, on this day in Tampa, I was ornery and sluggish because I was about 4 for my last 34. I wasn’t balanced. I wasn’t driving the ball. I was fighting the flu and I was miserable. And then my phone rang.

“Paul? This is Ted Williams,” the booming voice said. “I’ve been thinking about you. You’re a hell of a ballplayer.” Did I just hear him correctly? Was this really Ted Williams and did he really call me a hell of a player? Yes and yes. I placed my hand on the back of a chair, steadied myself, and sat down. My immediate reaction was to sit like a disciplined student in a classroom because I wanted to give this momentous call the respect it deserved.

I knew my sister, Molly, a reporter for The New York Times, was scheduled to interview Ted about food, fishing, and obviously, a little baseball, too. When Molly told me about this, I was in awe that my older sister was poised to speak with one of the greatest hitters of all time. I jokingly told Molly that I was struggling and that she should tell Ted I needed some advice. Still, I never expected Molly’s visit to Ted’s home would result in him contacting me. This all brought me back to being the boy whose proud father had told him his swing was reminiscent of Williams’s swing. I couldn’t match Williams’s swing or his accomplishments, but I was giddy about talking to the man himself.



Paul O'Neill was a star outfielder for the Cincinnati Reds and the Yankees. He hit .288 with 281 home runs in 17 seasons. Credit...Grand Central Publishing

To this day, even with my sister's connection and her gentle or forceful nudging, I'm still amazed that Ted was willing to call me. I was even more amazed when Ted said, "I bet you're not hitting the ball the other way." That comment gave me goose bumps because it showed that Ted knew the way that I had to hit to be productive. To be successful, I needed to look for pitches on the middle or outside part of the plate and hit the ball to the opposite field. So,

the legendary Ted Williams — a pull hitter who was also talented enough to adjust and hit the ball up the middle or the opposite way — knew my approach.

“You know what?” I replied. “You’re right. I’ve been getting out on my front side too quickly.” A minute into the conversation, I was already trying to process how surreal it was that Ted Williams — *the Ted Williams* — was evaluating me as a hitter. Ted won six batting titles, two M.V.P.s, made nineteen All-Star teams, was the last man to hit over .400 (in 1941), and finished his phenomenal career with a .344 average, 521 homers, and an all-time record .482 on-base percentage. He was the hero who also paused his career twice to serve our country in World War II and the Korean War. And he was talking to me about hitting! It was such an inspirational and nerve-racking call because I was absorbing every word Ted uttered. But I also felt like there were a hundred questions I needed to ask before the voice of God hung up. I didn’t want to interrupt him, so I let him guide the conversation and, sure enough, Ted said something that made me smile and made me feel like I had done something right as a hitter.

“Don’t let anybody change you,” Ted barked.

As much as any hitting advice I’ve ever received, those words resonated with me because they aligned with how I always felt. A stubborn and serious hitter, I was dedicated to my approach of swinging level and elevating into a slight uppercut to hit line drives. I believed in that swing and still believe in it. Hearing Williams say a hitter shouldn’t let anyone change him was one of the highlights of the call and was something I could have listened to all day.

Honestly, I should have expected Ted to emphasize that because it’s what he had written in “The Science of Hitting,” his seminal book in which he dissected the most difficult thing to do in sports: hitting a baseball. I don’t remember the first time I picked up the book, but I do remember being enamored with it. There’s a picture of Ted on the cover, his front foot slightly lifted, his eyes focused on the baseball, and body language that screams, “I’m about to crush this pitch.” Ted wrote that Lefty O’Doul, who hit .349 in his career, told him, “Son, whatever you do, don’t let anybody change your style. Your style is your own.” Ted obeyed. So did I.



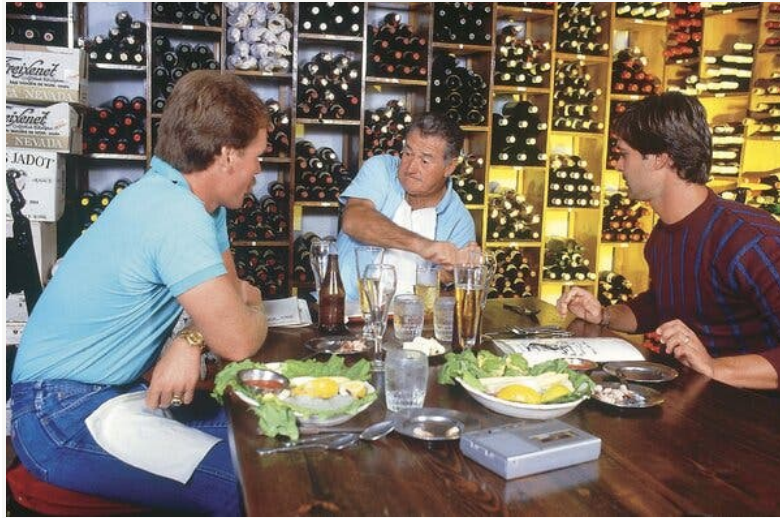
O'Neill was known as "The Warrior" for his intense approach to the game. He was in a brighter mood at Old-Timers' Day in 2013. Credit...Barton Silverman/The New York Times

As Ted continued to preach, he underscored the importance of having the best scouting report of all on myself. Basically, Ted said, I needed to know what I did well and work tirelessly to be superb at those things. I think that philosophy should apply to every athlete. It's a mistake to complicate things by trying to be something you're not or by trying to do something you're not capable of doing. "Know yourself as a hitter," Ted said. "Know who you are and what you can do and go do it. But you gotta know yourself."

Since I had always thought that batters need to be comfortable and confident in the way they hit, it was reassuring to hear Ted say the same thing. I always listened to the various voices that filled my world with hitting advice, but I was selective about which suggestions I actually adopted.

It's kind of humorous to concede this, but Ted's advice actually made me think about my sons. When I came home from Yankee Stadium after games, I would throw tennis balls to Aaron and Andy, just like my father did with me. But they were always trying to imitate Derek Jeter or Ken Griffey Jr. as we practiced. I understood that was just kids being kids, trying to be like their idols and the players they watched on television. I did the same thing with Pete Rose, Joe Morgan, and my heroes on the Big Red Machine. But after seeing dozens of Jeter and Griffey swings and few authentic Aaron and Andy swings, it would frustrate me because they weren't paying as much attention to their own hitting styles. "Just because you stand like Derek Jeter or swing like Ken Griffey Jr.," I would tell them, "doesn't mean you're going to hit like them."

Well, let's just say they didn't listen to me in the same way that I listened to my father or Ted. Like Ted, I really believed in being comfortable, from start to finish, when I was at the plate. Ted was so intelligent and so curious about hitting, even wondering if I had ever smelled the wood of the bat burning after a foul ball. I had. I've spoken to many people who don't believe hitters can smell the burnt wood when they connect on a pitch, but because of the friction of the wood against the leather, it's possible to smell it.



Wade Boggs, Ted Williams and Don Mattingly discussed the finer points of hitting, including the smell of burnt wood when connecting with a pitch, over dinner in 1986. Credit...Ronald C. Modra/Sports Illustrated/Getty Images

In a rendezvous of three great hitting minds, Ted sat down with Wade Boggs and Don Mattingly in 1986 to talk hitting, and Peter Gammons of *Sports Illustrated* was there to describe the scene. At one point, Williams asked Boggs, "Have you ever smelled the wood from the bat burning?" Boggs was bewildered and said he had not. So, Williams said, "Five or six times, hitting against a guy with good stuff, I swung hard and — oomph — just fouled it back. Really hit it hard. And I smelled the wood of the bat burning. It must have been the seams that hit the bat just right, and the friction caused it to burn, but it happened five or six times." Boggs shook his head and just said, "Awesome," which was the only appropriate reaction.

As astonished as I was while speaking with Ted, it was reassuring that the conversation seamlessly became a chat between two hitters. Again, he was the expert. I did more listening than talking, but I did ask Ted what type of pitches he looked for in certain situations. It was enlightening to hear Ted say he didn't like to swing at the first pitch of an at bat because he wanted to evaluate what

type of pitches a pitcher had on a given day. Mostly though, Ted stressed the importance of getting a good pitch to hit. It sounds simple, but it's not.

I've flourished and I've failed as a hitter so I know how difficult it is to succeed in the major leagues. With so many pitchers throwing close to 100 miles per hour and with batters facing several powerful arms per game, it's never been so challenging to hit in the majors. But, in that difficult pursuit, not every hitter follows Williams's advice of being focused on who they are and what they do well.



O'Neill's time with the Yankees included a stretch in which the team won four World Series titles in five seasons. Credit...Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

In the current version of Major League Baseball, it's a power-hungry world and a power-happy world. Home runs are the most desired commodity. It's visible in the way players try to pummel the ball into the next ZIP code, it's obvious in the way hitters are rightfully rewarded with handsome salaries, and it's also apparent in the way fans react every time a ball travels 450 feet. Many batters are swinging at the bottom of the baseball to try and get the ball in the air and, more importantly, to send it sailing over the fence. My strategy was to hit on top of the baseball because I believe that gave me the best chance to make contact and hit line drives. Ted believed in hitting the ball hard and hitting it in the air. So do I. And, again, my mission was to hit through the ball and hit line drives.

I still think a lot about that conversation with Ted. There are baseball players whose names are iconic because of what they achieved. Ted Williams is one of those gigantic names. Every baseball player knows or should know the

intimate details of Williams's Hall of Fame career. But to get a call from him? That's just unfathomable. If I had met Ted at a game and talked about hitting for a few minutes, that would have been cool and surreal, too. But there was something so phenomenal about having that one-on-one call. For those ten minutes or so, I had a personal hitting coach and his name was Ted Williams.



Williams understood what had made him great as a hitter, and he saw something different in what could make O'Neill thrive. Credit...Jeffery A. Salter/The New York Times
A few hours after the 1999 call, I was so invigorated in batting practice that I produced a bunch of squarely-hit shots. And I kept telling myself, "If Ted Williams thinks I should be hitting the ball the other way, I'm going to make sure I'm hitting the ball the other way." So, I worked diligently on smacking line drives to left-center field. After every well-placed liner, I heard Ted's authoritative voice telling me I was doing exactly what I needed to do as a hitter.

Ted left me with these final pieces of advice: "Wait for your pitch," Williams added. "And remember, the lousier you're hitting, the more you're thinking about hitting. You shouldn't have a worry in the world. I'm telling you right now. You're a hell of a player."

Yes, I heard it right. Ted Williams called me a hell of a player. I think I could have retired that day and been a happy man. Oh, and after my conversation with Ted, I ripped two line drives to the opposite field that night. I felt like a hell of a ballplayer.

SWING AND A HIT: Nine Innings of What Baseball Taught Me

By Paul O'Neill and Jack Curry

272 pp. Grand Central Publishing. \$23.99.

Copyright 2022 © by Paul O'Neill and Jack Curry

Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/22/sports/baseball/paul-oneill-book.html>

Paul O'Neill was a beautiful lefthanded hitter like Ted Williams, and a great player. He hit the way I love most—when not succumbing to what the opposition wants you to do, say, hit a ground ball at a right-side infielder because the pitch was down and away, to set up a double play; instead, foul it off or poke it into the rightfield corner for a double—Paul hit the ball where and as it was pitched, hard (a line drive), to any field, with enough elevation to get between outfielders or over their heads, even over the fence. He was also the consummate professional hitter: he battled and made the pitcher throw good pitches, lots of them (driving up pitch counts, showcasing the other guy's stuff.)

New York teams have the best broadcasters. Paul O'Neill, David Cone, John Flaherty, Ken Singleton (maybe retired), and Michael Kay have worked together so long and know their stuff, hitting and pitching, play-by-play, Yankees and baseball lore. They don't tell us a tiny fraction of the "colorful" stuff they know, but they always have an anecdote about Yogi or Mariano. Cone, in particular, was naughty. I have never been able to find the cartoon I once saw of a Yankees bullpen coach peering in under the stands, silhouetted, barking "You warm yet Cone?" David on a day between starts, when he would never be called upon to pitch, had been caught *in flagrante* with a couple of women behind the bullpen.

The Mets broadcast team, principally Keith Hernandez, Ron Darling, and Gary Cohen are inimitable, each master of his craft (Keith, hitting and fielding), Ron (pitching), Gary (play-by-play with a phenomenal baseball memory) delightfully working and grating good-naturedly off each other as only New Yorkers can.

Ted Williams—I kid you not—had his head preserved cryogenically so that he might be able to come back and hit again. If he is brought back, I'm sure that head will pick right up where it left off, talking about hitting and Ted Williams. Williams was a great narcissist, but harmless (not nasty like his fellow master student of hitting, Ty Cobb, could be). But if Mr. Williams was really as smart and good as he thought he was, I think he would have learned to selectively "go the other way" instead of hitting stubbornly into the shift. (The cursed shift was invented for him.) But he was determined to be "Ted Williams" no matter what.

It must not have been gameday when "The Splendid Splinter", "Donny Baseball" and "Chicken Man" sat down for lunch: Wade Boggs always ate chicken on gameday, one of his many superstitions. He also always took his girlfriend/mistress with him on road trips. I don't think he could put up much defense in the divorce. But another complete, well-rounded, beautiful hitter.

TJB