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Spring training for the San Francisco
Giants at Scottsdale Stadium.

A FAN FINDS HIS ARM AT BASEBALL
FANTASY CAMP.

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHELLY STRAZIS

OF MINNER



“NOW BATTING, NUMBER 7, MIKE Shapiro,” booms the announcer as I stride to the plate at Scottsdale Stadium, the San Francisco Giants’ spring training ballpark in the Arizona desert. I’m looking out to a glorious emerald field, a center field wall that’s 430 feet away, and thousands of forest green seats.

Playing first base for the opposing team is Gold Glove winner J.T. Snow; at third is the former Giants slugger Darrell Evans. Patrolling left field is the imposing Jeffrey “Hackman” Leonard. This is no childhood dream: this



is the annual San Francisco Giants Fantasy Camp. For a week, I’m playing ball with—and being coached by—men who were once my childhood idols.

THE FANTASY BECOMES REALITY EARLY on a Monday morning as I walk down a long flight of stairs, past framed action shots of Giants greats Willie Mays and Willie McCovey, and into the Scottsdale clubhouse. In a row of lockers hang our tailored uniforms: a cream-colored jersey with matching pants for the days we’re on the home team, and a black uni with orange outlines for “road” games. The

uniforms are identical to the ones worn by the pros (well, maybe a little smaller as many of the pros top six feet and some have filled out a bit since their playing days).

When I see my locker, with the uniform bearing my name in an arc across the back, the feeling is electric. I dress from cap to high socks in professional gear, making sure I don’t miss a belt loop or leave a pocket out, infractions that would get me rung up in Kangaroo Court (more on this baseball tradition later).

I’m dressing across from legendary pitcher Vida Blue, who was almost unhittable in his prime. “Hey Vida, I saw you beat the Cubs in 1986 at Wrigley Field,” I tell the still-fit pitcher, recalling that he only gave up one run on that perfect summer day in Chicago. And he hit a home run—a rarity for a pitcher—in that game. “You remember that homer!” Vida, now in his late 50s, exclaims. “Down the line, baby. Down the line.”

Dozens of my fellow campers and I lace up our turf shoes and head to the batting cages behind the right-field wall for instruction from veteran Giants infielder Joel Youngblood. As bats crack against machine-pitched balls in the cage, he tells us, “Hit horizontal to the ground. You want a straight ball to give fielders the least time to get there. If you hit it correct, you always hit the ball hard. If you try to hit it hard, you won’t always hit it correct.”

Darrell Evans, whose nickname is “Doody” due to his facial resemblance to Howdy, strides in front of the batting cages next. “I don’t understand a thing he just said,” jokes the burly third baseman. “You always hear, ‘Keep your eye on the ball’—the guys who say that, they couldn’t hit either!”

As we circle Evans, now in his early 60s, he takes a poke at the conventional wisdom of hitting up the middle: “Who are the best fielders? The shortstop and center fielder. And where’s the deepest part of the park? Center field,” he says. “So why the hell would you want to hit it up the middle?!” His final targets are TV announcers who say a batter swung too hard. “You never hear them say that when they hit it.” Two guys driving a garbage cart out of the stadium roll by: “Those guys couldn’t hit,” Evans cracks, “and look what they’re doing!”

We (90 or so campers) jog over to center field to get our picture taken with the pros.

One by one, we stand with some of the game’s greats for a quick snapshot. Next we take batting practice and shag fly balls as the veterans watch us and take notes.

“Let’s see what you got,” Hackman says. The pros are evaluating us for an upcoming draft—there will be eight teams, each with 11 or 12 players and two managers. Ex-pitcher Dave “Tuna” Heaverlo tells us we have a rigorous week ahead and advises us to pace ourselves. “There are no pro scouts here,” Tuna says, noting that one participant in last year’s camp hoped to make the leap from fantasy camp to the big leagues. “No one here is going to sign a pro contract. So take it easy; the object is to make it to Saturday,” the final day of the weeklong camp.

I’m assigned to a team coached by J.T. Snow, two years removed from his big-league career, and Mike “Tiny” Felder, a speedster who was one of baseball’s stolen-base leaders in the late ’80s and early ’90s. Most of us campers are in our 40s and 50s, but our catcher, Brooklyn native Steve Schiffman, is in his 60s. One of our outfielders, Scotty MacVicar, was the Giants’ head groundskeeper in San Francisco for many years. Some campers play regularly—others haven’t picked up a bat since childhood. But everyone wants to win. Someone observes the first game doesn’t count towards a tournament and Schiffman glares: “They all count.”

I watch baseball on TV and go to a few games a year, so I think I understand the game pretty well. Wrong, so wrong. At camp I realize how intricate baseball really is. And how much harder it is to make the right play in the heat of the moment.

Unlike at some other fantasy camps, we’re playing real baseball: we have pitchers, not pitching machines; wood, not aluminum bats; and steals are allowed. After I line a single over the second baseman’s head, Felder coaches me at first base. He advises me to watch the pitcher and steal second base as the ball leaves his hand. I slide in and beat the throw.

Felder, a veteran outfielder, shows me how to follow the trajectory of a ball when looking into the sun. Use the glove to shield your eyes, he says, and position your body sideways so you’re viewing the ball at an angle. That day his coaching pays off—while playing right field a ball is hit over my left shoulder. I glide back about 40 feet, shield my eyes, and hear the ball pop into my



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Opposite page: Pitching instruction from the legendary Vida Blue. This page, clockwise from top left: an autograph from coach TK; the camp's professional-grade bats and uniforms; Shapiro at the bat; talking strategy before game one; game two delayed on account of rain. Next page: The author poses with his teammates (left) and heads off to the showers.





mitt for the third out of a 1-2-3 inning. I come in to high-fives and backslaps from old pros. Bill Laskey, the former Giants pitcher who runs the camp, calls it the “catch of the day.” I wonder if it can get any better than this.

The next day we prepare to meet the enemy: our eight teams are facing eight clubs from the rival Chicago Cubs camp. We drive about a half hour to the Cubs’ Mesa fields and have to adjust to hitting against pitching machines. I hear Felder approach the Cubs’ manager and say, “Hey Sweet Swinger!” I recognize the face from my boyhood baseball cards: it’s Hall of Fame outfielder Billy Williams, still appearing regal in the Cubs’ royal blue jersey.

We don’t hit well against the machine and the base of my thumb is swollen from a stinger off the end of the bat. Back in Scottsdale I go to the training room—the Giants have brought professional trainers to help us make it through the week. There are three body-size cold tubs, just like in the pros, where we can ice down our weary legs. Some guys get their shoulders wrapped in ice, weekend warriors after a battle—the place looks like a M*A*S*H unit. I get a small tray and fill it with ice water for my swollen thumb. “Anything else I can do for this?” I ask the trainer. He throws in a can of Corona beer.

Early the following morning, before we even hit the field, Snow summons me to Kangaroo Court. We’re in the locker room and J.T. accuses me of calling Mike Felder by his nickname “Tiny.” Then, in front of 100 fellow campers and ex-pros, he has me stand back to back with Felder. I’m two inches shorter. Guilty as charged, and busted for a \$5 fine. My payment

is pooled with those of other player-violators to benefit school rec programs.

The intensity ratchets up a notch that day as our tournament begins. Schiffman, whose hand has swollen after getting hit by a pitch on day two, still catches. After a close loss in the morning, we race to a 7-0 lead in the afternoon game. But then our bats go silent, and our pitcher, who looks like a just-retired pro but doesn’t play like one, loses command. We’re defeated 9-7.

“You get oh so close, then you’re so far back,” Felder says. “Now you know how the real Giants feel.”

Schiffman finally gets his hand examined—the X-ray shows fractures at the base of two fingers—and his camp experience is over. Another teammate, a pro golfer who slid headfirst into third base on the first day, broke his thumb. We barely have enough players for the final game, a contest against the pros.

I dream of facing Vida Blue and then it happens: it’s the final inning, players on second and third, we’re down by a run, Vida’s on the mound. First pitch is a fastball he blows by me—the second pitch I foul off. Vida stares into the catcher, nods, and zings one down and away—I whip the bat head around, connect and the ball drops into right center—two runs score and we win.

OK, that was pure fantasy. I didn’t face Vida, but I did get wood on a ball hurled by Gary Lavelle, who despite being two decades removed from his pro career can still bring it. As I jogged back into the dugout, my feet crunching against the husks of sunflower seeds, I tried to understand the surge of exhilaration I felt.

Sure, it was fun playing baseball for a week with old pros. But it was something more: seeing Hackman in left field, the fleet-footed Brett Butler in center, and Vida on the mound created a field of dreams that transported me back to my youth, an idyllic time when anything was possible and all that mattered was the game. □

IF YOU GO...

The San Francisco Giants Fantasy Camp is held annually in January at Scottsdale Stadium near Phoenix. It’s open to men and women over 30. For 2009 dates, check the web page sanfrancisco.giants.mlb.com/sf/fan_forum/fantasycamp.jsp—or follow the links from sfgiants.com, or call camp director Bill Laskey at 800-411-1919.

Playing baseball for a week might not seem grueling, but prepare for a marathon. Get fit before camp by riding a bike or treadmill, doing yoga, or jogging. The typical day begins at 6am with breakfast and stretching, followed by instruction and two games. The cost of \$4,475 includes all camp activities, most meals, lodging at an upscale hotel (with a roommate, just like it used to be in baseball), and flights from the San Francisco area. —M.S.



