

This Joe D was backstop to greatness

by Tim Sullivan - CNS

CORONADO, Calif. - Lou Gehrig is to blame for the crooked fingers on Joe DiGangi's right hand. Gehrig hit a foul ball in the 1930s that dislocated two of DiGangi's digits and nearly knocked off a nail.

Then as now, the baseball catcher played a perilous position. Now as then, DiGangi would have gladly done it for a couple of hot dogs.

"Lou Gehrig always had a hitch (in his swing), and he tipped one," DiGangi recalled Wednesday, holding out his hand to describe the damage. "If you look at the damn glove I (had), it was rawhide in those days. You couldn't catch with one hand because the ball would pop out. You see the guys now catching with one hand. If I had that, I would have made the Hall of Fame."

Joe DiGangi laughs at his little conceit because he knows it is comical. As a ballplayer, he was only a bit player, a bullpen catcher for the New York Yankees of Gehrig and Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio. But as one of the dwindling survivors of a dramatic era, his memories fairly beg to be bronzed.

Compared with the company he kept, DiGangi's baseball career was barely a footnote. He was a kid catcher in Brooklyn who attracted the keen eye of Yankees scout Paul Krichell, who had earlier signed Gehrig and who later discovered Whitey Ford, but DiGangi never played in the major leagues, and he passed up the chance to work his way up through the minors because there was more money to be made in bricklaying.

DiGangi, now 92, spent nine seasons with the Yankees in a part-time capacity between 1933 and 1941, catching batting practice, warming up pitchers and, he says, sometimes serving as a lookout when Ruth would visit the bullpen for a belt of liquor between innings.

With a new Yankee Stadium under construction, DiGangi plans to visit the House That Ruth Built next week for a "last hurrah." This is sure to be a nostalgic and sentimental occasion, but it is unlikely to get maudlin. The old man will not be dreading the old ballpark's demise.

"They need a new stadium," he said. "The thing is so damn old."

He is sitting at a glass table in his 15th-floor waterfront condominium in Southern California, telling tales that have been polished by repetition, supplying captions for the photographs he has gathered in a manila file folder.

There's one picture of DiGangi and DiMaggio in their Yankee pinstripes and another of the two men dressed for a service game during World War II: DiMaggio with the 7th Army Air Force team; DiGangi as a Seabee Bulldog. There's a spring training shot of DiGangi in his catcher's gear, standing behind the bloated Ruth as he turns on a pitch. There's a team picture from 1933 with DiGangi seated on the ground, the Babe beaming from the back row and Gehrig standing with his head tilted away from the camera.

There's a lot of history here, and the host has obliged the media more than once with this material. Prominently displayed in the living room is the 2006 Emmy Channel 4 San Diego's John Weisbarth received for a feature story on DiGangi. Wrapped in a rubber band sits a 3-inch stack of mail that was prompted by a February piece in The New York Times.

Joe DiGangi worked on the construction of New York's Rockefeller Center and the drydock at Brooklyn Navy Yard where the battleship Missouri was built. He made his money building condominiums in the Virgin Islands before retiring to Coronado. Yet like so many men who have briefly dallied in baseball, DiGangi's link to some of the game's great figures has given him his lasting distinction.

At Krichell's invitation, DiGangi first caught batting practice for the Yankees during the 1932 World Series, but only in New York. He did not see Ruth's celebrated "Called Shot" in Chicago, rejoining the team the following spring in St. Petersburg, Fla.

"I took a Greyhound bus from Brooklyn," DiGangi said. "I went to a pawn shop and bought a bag for \$5. It was my first trip out of New York, my first trip away from home."

Eager to make good, "full of pep and vim," DiGangi took pains to pursue foul pops, even in batting practice. Seventy-four years later, DiGangi proudly recalls Ruth teasing backup catcher Art Jorgens that the new kid was after his job.

But when the Yankees could only offer him a minor league deal at \$60 a month, DiGangi balked. "I could have made that panhandling," he said. He chose to go back to laying brick (at \$6.50 per hour), content to keep catching in a nonroster capacity for \$56 every two weeks.

"The money didn't mean anything," he says now. "They were taking a kid from a poor area and I went into the front door (of Yankee Stadium) like I was a celebrity."

"I used to see Babe Ruth giving autographs to all the kids. Once in a while, while he was there, a kid would say, 'Give me your autograph.' He wouldn't know who the hell I was. I'd say I was not a player, not a regular, and Babe Ruth would say, 'Give him your autograph anyway.'"

His was a broad brush with greatness. When Gehrig was dying and called himself "the luckiest man on the face of the earth," DiGangi was warming up a pitcher in the bullpen. When DiMaggio staged his 56-game hitting streak in 1941, DiGangi felt a part of it because of all the extra batting practice he had thrown him in spring training.

Later, when the two men were playing for service teams, DiMaggio repaid his debt by sending the Seabee Bulldogs four cases of beer along with a note signed, "Joe D."

The Seabees assumed the gift was from DiGangi. They would learn that he had famous friends.

For more photos of Joe DiGangi, go to signonsandiego.com.

Â© Copley News Service

This Joe D was backstop to greatness by Tim Sullivan - CNS