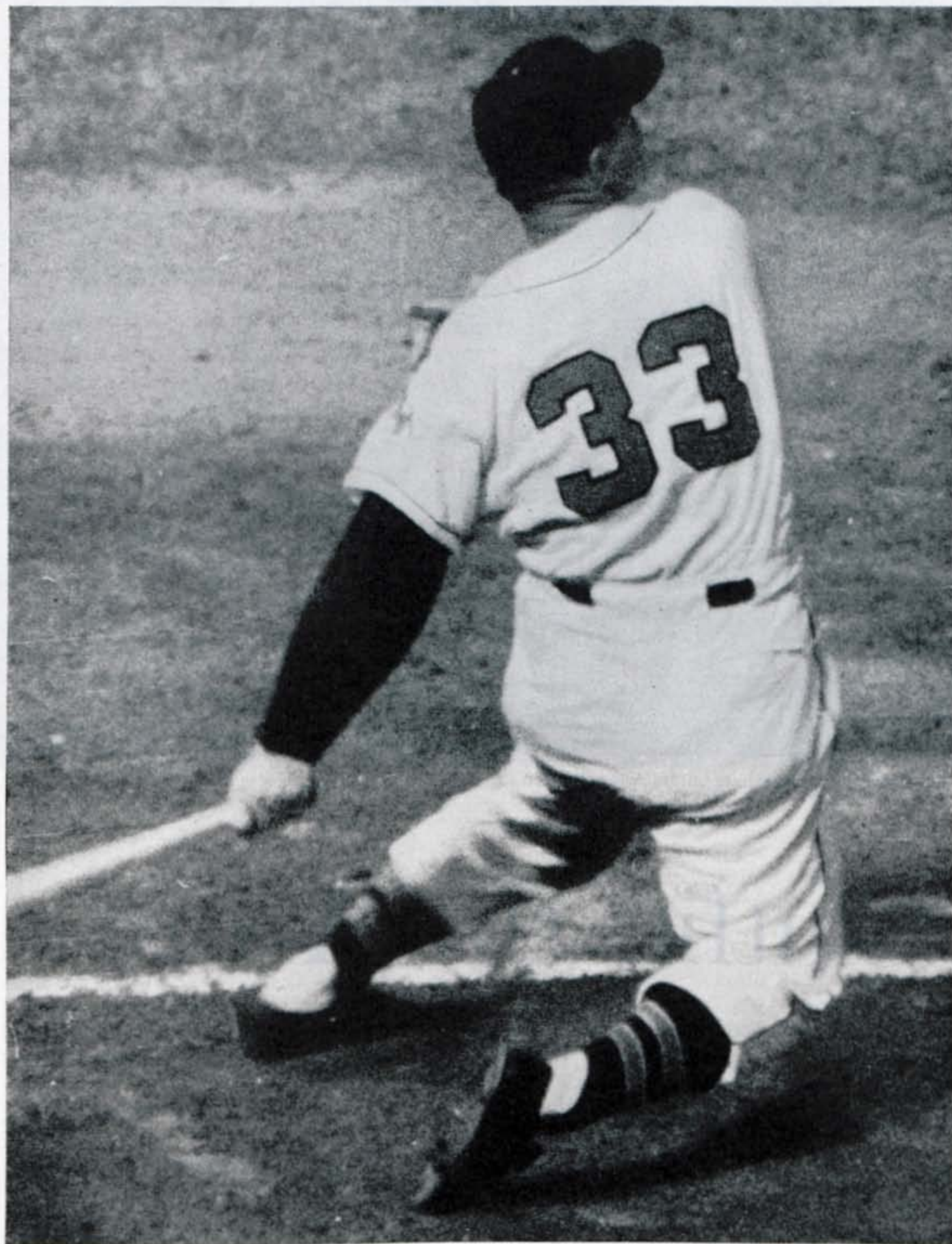


I Played Without Eating



Above: Cerv, his mouth wired shut, belts a homer against the Yankees, one of six during his month of agony.

The Kansas City Athletics' blockbuster, who refused to be benched by a broken jaw, tells how he played 28 excruciating games despite a fantastic injury.

By BOB CERV
as told to Al Hirshberg

When for a whole month recently I played ball with a broken jaw, I wasn't trying to be a hero. I was only trying to keep from going out of my mind. With my teeth wired together so tightly that I couldn't open my mouth, I had to live on a liquid diet. I couldn't chew, talk clearly, breathe properly, cough, laugh, yawn or even sneeze like a human being.

I could assume only two facial expressions. One was a square-jawed dead pan. The other was a weird grimace. If you try to talk with your teeth clenched tight together, you'll get some idea of what I mean. Every time you part your lips, your face goes into a sort of snarling smile. You look the same no matter how you feel.

You get so frustrated that your nerves are screaming, which is more than you can do. You dream about solid food, and go wild thinking about the nice, big yawn you can't have when you're tired. You can't even grind your teeth. They're practically cemented together.

No matter how healthy you feel, you know your life might be in danger at any moment. If something tickles your throat, you could choke. If you get sick to your stomach, you could literally drown. If your nose gets blocked up, you could

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Below: The author (right) fractured his jaw in this home-plate collision with Tiger catcher Wilson.



During his month as a prisoner of wire clamps, Cerv fed himself through a gap in his teeth with straws.



Free at last: Cerv could open his mouth, but sore jaws forced him to forgo the sirloin steak he craved.



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suffocate. In any of these cases, you must quickly get your mouth open. Somebody has to be with you all the time, ready to cut the wires on your teeth on short notice. It takes less than three minutes to choke to death.

I broke my jaw in a collision with Red Wilson, the Detroit Tigers' catcher, during the seventh inning of a night game on Saturday, May seventeenth, in Kansas City. I was trying to score from second base, but as I approached the plate, I saw that Wilson had me. I started to slide, then decided to crash into him, hoping I'd make him drop the ball. As we met, the left side of my face smashed against his shoulder. When I ran for the dugout after he tagged me out, I realized that a three-tooth lower plate on the left side of my mouth was out of line. I was too stunned to feel much pain, but I knew I was hurt.

"Something's wrong," I said to Jim Ewell, our trainer, who was standing on the dugout steps. Harry Craft, the manager, was right beside him.

"Take me out," I told Harry. "I think my jaw's broken."

"Go into the clubhouse with him and get a doctor," I heard Craft say to Ewell.

While we waited, I drank some orange juice. After a preliminary examination, the doctor told Jim it was a job for an orthopedic surgeon. We arranged to meet one at St. Luke's Hospital. X rays showed two breaks on the left side of my jaw, but they couldn't operate until the next morning. Because of the orange juice, I wasn't allowed to take anesthesia that night.

I phoned Phyllis, my wife, in Lincoln, Nebraska, and asked her to come to Kansas City the next morning. This was not as simple as it sounds. We have six children, with a seventh expected in August. Fortunately, my parents happened to be visiting us in Lincoln, and they agreed to stay with the children for a week so that Phyllis could be with me.

Just before I went to sleep Saturday night, I asked when I could play ball again.

"It'll be a while," a nurse said. "Maybe six weeks. You won't be able to chew, so you'll have to go on a liquid diet."

I heard her, but didn't get the significance of the liquid-diet part. All I knew was that I wasn't going to wait six weeks before I started playing ball again—not with the Kansas City Athletics in second place and me off to the best season of my career.

It really hadn't been much of a career. Like several of my Kansas City teammates, I was originally in the New York Yankees' farm system. Before I was bought by the Athletics at the end of the 1956 season, the only teams in organized baseball I'd ever played for were the Yankees and their top farm club, the old Kansas City Blues, of the American Association. I shuttled back and forth between the two from 1950 through 1953.

Then I put in three pretty discouraging years with the Yankees. Of course, it was wonderful to be with a winner and share in the World Series melon nearly every year. But I wasn't getting anywhere. Manager Casey Stengel used me in left field and as a pinch hitter—I hit a home run as a pinch hitter in the 1955 World Series—but I never got into more than fifty-six games in any given season.

Mickey Mantle owned center field, and Hank Bauer had a corner on right, but I had vague hopes of breaking into the lineup in left. Irv Noren had the job until 1956, when half a dozen of us shared it. I hit pretty well, but didn't play often

enough for it to mean very much. So I was neither surprised nor terribly disappointed when I was sold to the Athletics right after the 1956 World Series.

I didn't burn any barns down in Kansas City last year. We finished seventh, and I batted .272. I was supposed to be the strong man of the ball club, but I hurt my ankle early in the season and never felt quite right. I ended up with only eleven homers and forty-four runs batted in.

So I figured if I was ever going to show anything, it would have to be this year. I'm thirty-two years old and reaching the now-or-never stage. The way I started the season, it looked like now. From opening day on, I had a hot bat. At the time I broke my jaw on May seventeenth, I was leading the American League in home runs, with eleven, and in runs batted in, with thirty. I had a batting average of .344.

And now here I was, flat on my back at St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, waiting for them to set my jaw and listening to a nurse tell me it might be six weeks before I could play ball again. The last thing I remember just before going to sleep was thinking over and over to myself, *Not me! They won't keep me out six weeks—or even six days.*

The next morning they were able to give me an anesthetic. I woke up from it feeling pretty good. Dr. Frederick McCoy, a plastic surgeon, had performed the operation. He had secured my upper jaw to my lower with wires, so that the upper jaw acted as a cast. He filled the tiny openings between my teeth with rubber bands, leaving only one small hole where the broken plate had been, so that I could eat.

A nurse fitted a straw through the opening and commanded, "Sip."

I sipped, or maybe I should say I inhaled. I tried to get everything down at once. Not having eaten since the afternoon before, I was hungry. But all I could get into my mouth was a little straw's worth of chicken broth, and it wasn't enough. The broth was gone in no time.

Then the nurse gave me something else. I took a sip and tried to ask, "What is it?" It came out something like, "War ith it?"

"Gruel," the nurse said.

I used to read about people eating gruel in fairy tales when I was a kid, but this was the first time I'd ever tried it myself. It wasn't bad, and I inhaled it in a jiffy. Then she gave me a milk shake, but it was thick, and I couldn't get it all down through the straw.

When the nurse turned to leave, I mumbled, through my newly clenched teeth, "Hey, what else can I eat?"

"That's about it," she said.

"You mean I can't have anything else for six weeks?"

"Nothing more solid," she said. "Don't forget, you can't chew. You'll be on a liquid diet until those wires are off your teeth." Then she left.

I felt a sudden wave of panic. How could a 220-pound six-footer be expected to exist for six weeks on the likes of chicken broth, gruel and milk shakes?

But the first thing I asked the doctor was when I could play ball.

"You won't feel like playing ball for a while," he said.

"Look," I told him, "I've had this thing on for six hours and it's driving me nuts already. If I sit around and do nothing for six weeks, I'll be ready for the booby hatch. And besides, the ball club needs me."

"You can't do the ball club much good with a broken jaw," he said quietly. "Now just take it easy."

"When can I play ball?" I demanded again.

"Well"—the doctor hesitated—"maybe after a week or so, you can try."

He let me leave the hospital the next day. Maurice Bluhm, a close friend of ours in Kansas City, insisted that Phyllis and I stay at his house on Lake Lotawana, about twenty miles from the city. After the doctor had warned us of all the hazards and given instructions about how I should be handled, we headed for the lake. All the way down I complained about my diet.

When we arrived at Bluhm's place, there was a gift-wrapped package waiting for me. Inside were two plugs of tobacco, some chewing gum and a card which read, "To Bob, from the boys."

That was the first time I tried to laugh. But my teeth stayed put, and all I could manage was a Frankenstein grin.

Later in the day, Bluhm said, "Bob, how would you like to sip some steak for dinner?"

"Very funny," I grunted.

"I'm not kidding," he said. "We've got a blender in the kitchen, and the housekeeper's going to fix you a real meal."

I wasn't sure I knew what a blender was. Bluhm explained that it reduces solid food to liquid. As soon as I saw the one in the kitchen, I recognized it. I'd seen hundreds of similar gadgets. They have them at every soda fountain.

That night I had my first square meal through a straw. I started with a salad, made up of cottage cheese, fruit and mayonnaise. Then I sipped a main course of steak, potatoes and peas. After that came a chocolate frappé. The whole business tasted pretty good. And there was enough left over for a midnight snack. The housekeeper put it in a vacuum bottle to keep it warm, and that night, instead of raiding the refrigerator, I raided that vacuum bottle.

"You know," I said to Phyllis, "I might live, after all."

But the wires were driving me crazy. I kept trying to grind my teeth, and, of course, they wouldn't move. By the time I went to bed, the grinding had become practically a reflex.

When I woke up Tuesday morning, I found I'd succeeded in doing in my sleep what I couldn't do while I was awake. I'd broken the wires on one side of my mouth.

At the hospital the doctor put on double braces, and packed the rubber bands tighter. I experimented with my teeth, but now they were really cemented together. I couldn't have moved them with a crowbar without first snapping the wires.

My nerves were on edge, and I dreaded the thought of sitting around the house at the lake. On an impulse, I decided to go to the ball park, where the Athletics were scheduled to play a night game against the Washington Senators. I thought I'd work out a little. But it was drizzling, and nobody got to work out, although they did get the game played.

"This is awful," I moaned that night. "I wouldn't mind sitting around if I had a broken leg and couldn't move. But all I've got wrong with me is a broken jaw. I don't see why I can't play."

"Whether you can or not, I suppose you'd better try before you drive us all nuts," Bluhm said. "Let's see what the doctor says tomorrow."

At first, the doctor flatly refused to consider the idea. "It's only three days since your jaw was set," he pointed out. "You need more time."

Phyllis asked, "Would it be dangerous for him to play?"

"Well, I don't know," the doctor replied. "He'll have to do so much running around, I'm afraid his breathing would be affected."

"Let me try," I said.

"Come in tomorrow, and we'll talk about it."

The next day was Thursday. After a good night's sleep, I woke up a little more relaxed. I sipped a three-course breakfast—orange juice, a mixture of soft-boiled-eggs-and-bacon, and coffee. Then I went to the hospital.

The doctor was no more enthusiastic over the idea of my playing than he had been the day before, but when I kept insisting, he finally gave me permission to try.

"You've got to get it out of your system," he said, "but I don't think you'll last very long. Who ever heard of a man on a liquid diet playing big-league ball for any length of time? You won't get enough nourishment to make up for the energy you use" (Continued on Page 58)



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(Continued from Page 56) up. Besides, you'll have trouble breathing. You'll be ready to take a rest in less than a week."

He removed the rubber bands to ease my breathing, since it would help to have even the tiny openings between my teeth clear, but he warned me to quit if I couldn't catch my breath. I promised to be careful, and returned to the line-up that night against the Boston Red Sox, after an absence of three games. I managed to get through the evening without incident—or hits.

Every so often, a fan yelled, "Hey, Bob, speak to me!" or, "What's the matter—you're not talking? Don't you like us any more?"

In reply I bared my teeth. That was the best I could do.

I didn't have to do much running that night. While my breath sometimes came hard, it was no worse than it had been all week. The only thing that really seemed to bother me was when I swung and missed. The first time it happened, my jaw throbbed so much I thought I'd jarred it out of place. I stepped out of the batter's box and tried to grind my teeth, but they didn't give, so I knew I was all right.

In later games, I found I could neither throw nor slide without pain. Whenever I threw hard, I thought my teeth would come right out of my mouth. And when I slid, which wasn't often, my whole face hurt.

The first time I wanted to kick to an umpire about a called strike he almost laughed in my face. I tried to yell, and nothing came out but a soft hiss. That probably kept me out of trouble. There were other times when not being able to yell almost turned out to be serious. Once when I called for a fly ball in my semiwhisper, Bill Tuttle, the center fielder, didn't hear me, and we barely missed a collision. Another time, he didn't hear me trying to warn him, and he crashed into a wall.

I played every day and while my hitting fell off at first, it gradually improved. I seemed to get a little stronger as the days wore on, but something happened on Memorial Day that proved it didn't pay to get too confident. We had morning and afternoon games on a day when the thermometer was hovering around ninety. By the seventh inning of the first game, I was seeing spots in front of my eyes, and I was tempted to ask Harry Craft to take me out. I managed to finish up, but I felt like a dishrag when it was over.

In the clubhouse I had a terrible time trying to breathe. I told Jim Ewell, "I don't think I can play this afternoon."

"Maybe we ought to give him oxygen," Ewell suggested to Craft.

They checked with the doctor. By game time—when I felt better and decided to play—they had a small oxygen unit in the dugout for me. I needed it. In one of the early innings I had to catch three fly balls, and I ran all over the outfield chasing them. I could barely drag myself to the bench, and when I got there all I could do was gasp.

Without a word, Jim shoved the oxygen into my face. I took ten deep whiffs and felt better with every one. Later in the inning, facing Bob Kelly, the Indians' pitcher, I belted one over the bullpen in center field. It was my second homer since breaking my jaw. It nearly set a new style in the Athletics' dugout. Everyone else on the ball club suddenly wanted to gulp oxygen before going to bat.

A week after I got hurt, Phyllis had to go home to Lincoln. I stayed at Bluhm's for the rest of the club's home stand. Nobody slept in the same room with me, but Maury had an intercom system. If I made

the slightest noise during the night, it would get the whole house up.

I missed my kids badly, since I normally got to see them in Lincoln every week when the ball club was at home. Sithay Ann, the oldest, who is nine, came to Kansas City with her mother on the last day of our home stand. But I didn't see her three sisters and two brothers all during the time my teeth were wired together.

I didn't see my parents either. They still live in Weston, Nebraska, a farming community of 350 people about thirty miles north of Lincoln. I was born and brought up there. We didn't have any baseball. All I ever played in high school was basketball. I graduated in 1943, and went right into the Navy. After spending a couple of years overseas as a radarman aboard a destroyer, I got out in 1946 and entered the University of Nebraska under the G.I. Bill.

I played a little baseball during the summer of 1946 on a semipro team in Wahoo, seven miles from Weston. Although one of baseball's most famous old-time stars, Sam Crawford, lives there, I never met him until they had a day for him in Kansas City last year.

In college, I fell into baseball purely by accident. The assistant varsity basketball coach, Tony Sharpe, was also the varsity baseball coach. When the basketball season was over, he told me he needed a catcher, and I agreed to give it a try. I made the ball club, then shifted to the outfield in my sophomore year. I've been an outfielder ever since.

I met my wife during my freshman year at Nebraska. We got married on June 5, 1947, and had two children by the time I graduated in 1950. Joe McDermott, the Yankee scout in our area, sold me on signing with them by promising I'd start right out in the American Association.

During most of my years in baseball, I've been pretty lucky in avoiding injuries. I'm a rugged guy and rarely got hurt. Outside of my ankle problem last year, and the broken jaw this year, I never had much trouble along those lines. I packed it all into the weeks my mouth was wired up.

As long as we played at home, I managed pretty well, but when we went on the road, there were new problems. I had to have a roommate who knew what to do in case of emergency, and I carried all kinds of equipment. There was the

blender, the oxygen unit, three vacuum bottles, flexible straws, a portable electric water heater and vitamin and salt pills. We had a list of doctors to call in every city we visited, in case anything went wrong.

We flew to Washington on Monday, June second, which was an off day. I had X rays before leaving, and my jaw was coming along all right.

I said to the doctor, "I hate the thought of taking another month of this. Can't I get the wires off sooner?"

"Oh, I meant to tell you," he said. "Unless something unforeseen develops, we're going to cut you loose June sixteenth—the day after you get back from this eastern trip."

I tried to grin and, as usual, gave it up as a bad job.

I got a pocket calendar and began checking off the days. Jim Ewell was my roommate, since he was the only one on the club who knew how to unwire me. After we checked into the hotel in Washington, he gave instructions on what kind of food I was to have—no roughage; only the choicest steaks, ground twice, and clear soup. Everything had to be piping hot.

Boy, they sure must love us in Washington! The first night we were there, we sent the food back twice, once because the soup had noodles in it and the other time because the rest of the meal was cold. When we were finally satisfied, I carefully put the steak and potatoes and peas into the blender, diluted it with the soup and triumphantly switched it on.

With a swoosh that drove Jim and me against the farthest wall, my dinner splattered all over the room. I'd forgotten to put the lid on!

At bedtime I turned in and slept like a baby. Jim spent a miserable night. When he slept, it was with one ear open, like a mother listening for a child's cry. But he didn't get much sleep. He'd eaten something that didn't agree with him, and was up half the night.

The waiter who brought up my food in Washington had to go back to the kitchen every night we were there because something was wrong each time. Everywhere else we went we left a trail of waiters who must have been just as glad to see us go.

There were times when Jim showed admirable patience with me, particularly

the night in Baltimore when I had a sudden urge for a hamburger just before we went to sleep. He called room service and ordered a regular one for himself and a special one for me. "Make it out of the best grade of steak," he said, "and be sure it's ground twice." He repeated the order a couple of times.

Just before he hung up, I said, "Tell them not to forget ketchup."

He sputtered, but managed to relay the message without blowing his stack. When the hamburger, smothered in ketchup, came up, I put it in the blender, mixed it with some leftover steak and had a nice midnight snack. I felt like Oscar of the Waldorf.

I got up late one morning in New York and ordered three soft-boiled eggs with a rasher of bacon. The service was slow, and by the time the eggs arrived they were hard-boiled. I hate hard-boiled eggs, but didn't have time to reorder. I finally mixed them with oatmeal and sipped it all up. When there's nothing but a blender between you and starvation, you can manage to stand almost anything.

The farther we traveled the better I felt, because each move brought me nearer the day when the wires would come off. When we arrived in Boston on Friday morning, June thirteenth, I felt like a marathon runner going into the homestretch. Three more nights—just three nights—and it would be all over.

Friday and Saturday dragged by, and the fact that we lost both games to the Red Sox didn't make things any easier. But when I woke up Sunday morning, I couldn't wait to get to the ball park for the double-header that day.

"Tomorrow," I hissed to anyone close enough to hear me, "my braces come off."

It turned out to be a great afternoon both for the ball club and for me. We swept the two games, and I had a home run, three triples and two singles. The triples almost killed me; I had to inhale oxygen after each one. I was so tired I couldn't finish the second game, but I didn't mind.

We flew back to Kansas City Sunday night. On the airplane somebody pointed out to me that, broken jaw and all, I was still leading the American League in home runs with seventeen, and in runs batted in with fifty-one. My batting average had dropped from .344 to .310, but in the twenty-eight games I had played with those wires on, I had hit six homers—more than in any of my seasons with the Yankees—and had driven in twenty-one runs.

I couldn't get to St. Luke's Hospital fast enough on Monday. While I waited for X-ray pictures to be developed, I weighed myself for the first time in a week. The needle stopped at 216. In spite of the liquid diet and the fact that I had played ball almost every day, my weight had stood up well. During the most rugged month of my baseball career, I'd lost only four pounds.

The X rays were perfect, and the doctor went right to work on me. By early afternoon the wires were off, and I was a free man.

"What are you going to do now?" someone asked me.

"Eat a nice, big sirloin steak—straight," I said.

"Not yet," said the doctor. "You won't be eating steak straight for a week."

I grinned, then yawned extravagantly. But the doctor was right. My mouth was still too sore for steak. I had to settle for deviled eggs that first day. At least I could eat them with a spoon. My blender bender was over.

THE END



"You remember me—last summer—Echo Point—oint—oint—oint—oint—oint."