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sports nut

## The Autograph Man

A baseball player answers his fan mail 15 years later.

By Bryan Curtis

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Some tips on writing a letter to a major-league baseball player:

Begin with the formal address: It's "Dear Mr. Wilson," not "Dear Mookie." The first sentence should read: "My name is Bryan Curtis, and I'm [a suitably young age to be asking for an autograph]." Next: "You are my favorite baseball player." This is a mandatory compliment, whether or not it happens to be true. Between the ages of 9 and 12, in what could be considered my letter-writing prime, I'm pretty sure I bestowed it upon every player in the National League East. Sign the letter and insert a baseball card—a "common" rather than a valuable card, in case it isn't returned—along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Check your parents' mailbox every day. You may do this, as I did, after a full-on sprint home from the school bus. Every few weeks, if you're lucky, you'll find an envelope with some exotic postmark—Chicago, Milwaukee, Arlington—and your card, now brilliantly autographed, inside. A final word of advice: You'll increase your haul exponentially if you avoid the All-Star team. Choose benchwarmers, utility infielders, and rag-armed pitchers as your correspondents. Gods may not answer letters, but middle relievers generally do.

I recount all this because my mother, who still lives in the house I grew up in, sent me an e-mail the other day. Remember those ballplayers you used to write to, she asked. (My mother, it should be noted, made regular, if sometimes grudging, trips to the post office.) Well, she wrote, another one of them replied. Someone named Don Carman, a left-hander with the Philadelphia Phillies.

When I got my hands on the envelope, it immediately became one of my favorite possessions. To look at my penmanship is to see a child who has labored just to write his Fort Worth, Texas, return address in a straight line. The envelope has a brown rectangular stain where a baseball card rested against it for years. Carman has affixed his return-address label—he lives in Naples, Fla.—and, touchingly, added additional postage, since I had included a then-current 29-cent stamp. The card, No. 154 in the 1989 Topps set, bears his big, looping signature, signed with a bright-blue Sharpie.

Fifteen years ago, I figured Carman as a good candidate for a quick response. With the Phillies, he was a reliable southpaw who chewed up starts (35 in 1987, good for fourth in the National League), before leaving the majors for good in 1993. Where Carman showed greater promise was as a wit, a more cerebral version of Jay Johnstone. After enduring years worth of questions from benighted sports writers ("How'd it feel out there today, Don?"), Carman compiled a list of 37 suitably vapid answers that could be applied to almost any query. These included: "Baseball's a funny game"; "I just want to help the club any way I can"; "I didn't have my good stuff, but I battled 'em"; and, a personal favorite, "We have a different hero every day." Carman posted the list above his locker with a note that told writers, "You saw the game ... take what you need."

As it turns out, I am not Carman's only recent correspondent. In October, a Philadelphia TV station [reported](#) that Doug Ferraro, 23, received an autographed card from Carman in response to a letter that he

had mailed out 16 years before. This was now a legitimate mystery, so I called Carman in Florida to find out what happened.

"My wife told me it was time to clean the garage," Carman said. "So, I started digging through the stuff and found a box behind my tools. I opened it up and saw it was a bunch of fan mail, 200 to 250 letters." For Carman, this was a slight embarrassment. During his career, Carman had worked diligently to sign and return every one of the two or three letters he received each day. Judging from the date of Ferraro's card and the price of my stamp, he must have gotten our batch of letters some time in 1991, the year he left the Phillies for the Cincinnati Reds. "That year was the year I moved; I got a different house," he said. "I even remember putting them in the box, because it was unusual for me to do that. I thought I'd watch a football game and leisurely do them. It never got done."

Carman could hardly bear to throw the letters away. But at age 47, he didn't have the enthusiasm to pick through them, either. So he paid his son Jackson, who is 8 years old, \$4 to open and sort them. Then they sat down together, with Jackson, who never saw his father play, marveling at the rapturous odes inside. ("Dear Mr. Carman: You are my favorite baseball player. ... ") At first content with merely signing the cards, Carman got caught up in the spirit and started writing notes to the now-grown kids. He lugged the envelopes down to the Naples post office, where he discovered that most of them included 25-cent stamps. "I told the postman I needed 250 10-cent stamps, and 250 4-cent stamps, and he just looked at me like, 'What are you doing?' "

Only one of the letters gave Carman pause. Like nearly every other ballplayer, he made regular visits to local hospitals to see the terminally ill. It turned out that one letter was from a man whose wife Carman had visited. The woman had died, the man wrote, and he thanked Carman for brightening her final days. That lovely sentiment was now at least 15 years old. Carman perched over a piece of stationery for 20 minutes before he carefully scratched out his opening lines: "I know it's far in your past, but it's something that meant a lot to you. I know you carry her with you still." He wound up writing three pages. He's still waiting to hear from the woman's husband.

After his playing career, Carman earned a degree in sports psychology from Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers. He now works for Scott Boras, baseball's most rambunctious player agent, tending to the psychological demands of his clients. Even though he's been out of the game for more than a decade, new fan letters arrive in his Naples mailbox two or three times per week. The letters—presumably from grown-ups trying to recapture some small ecstasy from their childhood, when there was nothing more wonderful than receiving a piece of mail from a major-league ballplayer—contain the same platitudes. "Most of them say, 'You're one of my favorite players,' " Carman says. He is trying to answer them in a timely fashion.

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