

--- Love for glove is baseball's first bond ---

No piece of sports equipment engenders affection like the baseball mitt

By Justice B. Hill
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Bob Feller remembers as a boy leaving his home in rural Van Meter, Iowa, with his father and driving to Hopkins Sport Goods in Des Moines, the state capital 20 miles away, to buy his first baseball glove.

Feller, who was 9 at the time, sifted through the gloves displayed in the store before settling on a Rawlings. His glove, a Rogers Hornsby model, had three fingers, a style popular among players in the 1920s and '30s; it cost his father about \$7.

But in Feller's mind, it was priceless. For he had found more than his first glove; he had found his first love, too.

"That glove to me — I probably took it to bed with me," said Feller, now 90 and a baseball icon. "I loved that glove, just like you'd love an animal — a cat or a dog. I took very good care of it. I kept it oiled just right. I kept it clean."

He also has kept its memory fresh.

For the better part of sports history in America, no piece of sports equipment has engendered the kind of affection or candy-coated reflections as a man's first baseball glove. His wooden Louisville Slugger splinters and ends up kindling for a backyard barbecue; his shiny metal Prince tennis racket gives way to a higher-tech alloy; his Spalding basketball wear out long before he grows too attached to it.

And what boy sleeps with an official NFL football, the word "Wilson" branded into the pigskin, each night?

Or pampers it?

Life in Feller's youth was simpler, so it might be easy to dismiss his reminiscing about his Hornsby glove as the wistful longings of a man who looks at the past as his halcyon days.

But can what Feller recalls about his yesteryears be real to athletes of a more recent vintage? Does a baseball glove from boyhood mean much to a man in adulthood?

Not a generational thing

Yes, Mark Teixeira would tell anyone who asks him that question.

As his Yankee teammates prepare for a ballgame, Teixeira stands in front of his locker and looks out onto the visitors' clubhouse inside Progressive Field. He has his Rawlings glove within easy reach. He loves his Rawlings; the glove is the tool of his trade.

It isn't his Rawlings that Teixeira will soon muse about. It is one of his gloves from his teenage years: a Wilson A2000, a sweet-smelling piece of crafted leather his parents bought him while he was in high school.

"When you get a new glove, you spend pretty much every day with it for the next couple of weeks," Teixeira said. "At least getting it broke in."

His old A2000 is stored in a closet at his childhood home in Maryland, he said. His memories of it, however, remain as close to Teixeira as the Rawlings glove he can grab from the top shelf of his locker stall.

A lot of things a man might forget: his kindergarten teacher, his first bike or his first best friend; he might forget his first Valentine's Day card, the first book he read or his first concert, but his favorite baseball glove — more often than not it's also his first baseball glove — ranks with a first kiss or a first car, Feller said. A man forgets none of these, even as the months and then years roll along and his life hits its expected highs and lows.

His glove, like a diamond, is forever, said Noah Liberman, who wrote the seminal book of the subject: *Glove Affairs: The Romance, History, and Tradition of the Baseball Glove*.

“It’s probably the only piece of sports equipment that literally molds itself to your body and becomes a part of you,” Liberman said. “You could always buy a new driver, a new bowling ball or even a new tennis racket, and it’ll pretty much be like the old one.”

“But a baseball glove, once you use it for a while, becomes different from every other baseball glove on earth but just right for you.”

A first glove — or a favorite baseball glove — holds a unique appeal, he said. Lose it, and a man loses a chunk of himself. For his glove represents a point in the past; it connects the present with the past in ways that no other piece of sports equipment can hope to do.

A first glove story

Evan Longoria was only a year younger than Feller when he got his “real” glove. It was a TPX model with a Trapeze well. Longoria gave it the royal treatment.

“When you’re a boy, you always hear, ‘You gotta oil it,’ ” said Longoria, the Rays third baseman. “I put it under my mattress with a ball in it, a shoelace tied around it to get the shape.”

He broke it in perfectly, and he would have used the glove deep into his teens had he not left it at a baseball field for somebody else to find.

“I cried,” Longoria said. “I cried not only because I lost the glove but because I was getting yelled at by my parents. I mean, I wasn’t the most careful person when I was young; I lost stuff all the time.”

Not all gloves from a man’s yesteryear were off-the-rack new. Ryan Braun’s first glove wasn’t. It was a Rawlings model that was worn and beat up — a glove that Braun can’t remember how it came into his possession.

He was about 7 when he got it, and Braun, left fielder for the Brewers, used the glove until he was a sophomore in high school.

“Looking back on it now,” he said, “it’s meaningful because maybe it makes me appreciate where I’ve come from and how hard I’ve had to work to get where I’m at.”

Braun hated to get rid of his first glove, but he had no choice. He could restring and patch tears just so much before the leather fell apart, leaving him nothing much to repair.

Breaking up is hard to do

Cliff Lee shares a similar story to Braun’s.

Lee, who went to the Phillies in a trade with the Indians, doesn’t remember for certain, but his best guess is he got his first glove, old and worn, from his grandparents, who lived across the street. Lee knows exactly where his first new glove came from, though: Wal-Mart.

“It was a Regent,” said Lee, who was about 10 when he got it. “I used it until the palm of it started ripping.”

But long before his Regent went into the trash heap, Lee, who won the AL Cy Young Award last season, romanced his glove. At bedtime, he would stuff a baseball inside his glove, strap a belt around it to shape the pocket, shove the glove under his mattress and sleep on it.

His was true glove love.

Jensen Lewis, Lee’s former Indians teammate, fell in love with a glove when he was 4. Lewis said the glove was a Franklin model, and his mother bought it at either Dick’s or Toys-R-Us.

“It was kinda one of those things where I didn’t want to go anywhere without it,” said Lewis, a relief pitcher. “I put it in my backpack when I went to school. I guess I could say I thought it was my good luck charm for a while.”

To men like Lewis, a glove reflects a magical, carefree period in their life — a time when the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus were real. The thought of it brings back sun-washed memories of playing catch in the backyard, of hearing the pop of horsehide into

leather and of falling madly in love with the sport itself. They look at their baseball glove as an extension of their hand or as a travel companion that bonds with them in ways no other piece of sports gear does.

It hurts to break that bond.

Lewis outgrew his Franklin glove before he wore it out. Yet he didn't outgrow its memory — not even now. He wished he still had his first glove — or knew who did.

"I think I was in high school and went looking for it," he said. "I asked my mom, 'What happened to my glove?' She said, 'I think I gave it away to charity.'

"I said, 'Oh my God, that's my glove.' "

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