

And, you're out!

Major league baseball's Billy Bean tells all

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

You think you've had a bad day? Compare your worst to major league baseball player Billy Bean's. Still closeted in 1995, he watched his first lover, Sam, die of AIDS complications and then went to the ballpark that afternoon to learn he had been sent down to the minors.

Less than a year later, the boyishly handsome Bean quit baseball altogether, came out to his friends and family and settled down with a new partner in Miami. *Going the Other Way: Lessons from a Life In and Out of Major-League Baseball* is a compelling first-person account of trying to fit into the homophobic world of professional sports.

Bean was born in California's conservative Orange County. His father married his 18-year-old mother after she became pregnant, then left when Bean was 6 months old. Despite being small and slight, he persisted to become a star athlete—high school football quarterback, full athletic scholarship to college and then drafted by the New York Yankees during his junior year.

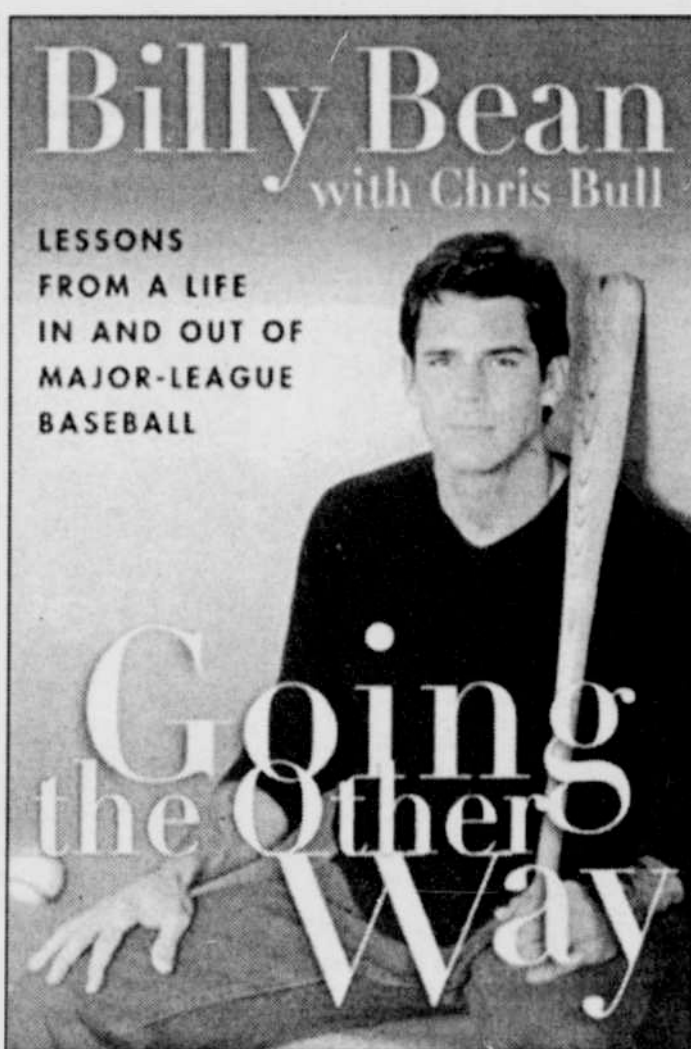
But Bean was not considered fast or strong enough to be a starting player, and the next 10 years saw him bouncing between major, minor and winter leagues. During this time he "earned a reputation as one of the biggest lover boys" and married his college sweetheart. But he also began having sexual feelings toward men.

He finally began acting on those feelings at the age of 28, escaping from the other baseball players to find out-of-the-way bars while the team was on the road. "This was clearly no phase," he realized after finding yet another man attractive.

He met Sam in the shower of a health club where, ironically, his wife was waiting in the lobby; they divorced soon after. Frightened of being ostracized and rejected, he kept his new relationship secret, even hiding Sam away in the garage when teammates dropped by.

Bean left baseball but still didn't come out. Living in Miami with his second partner, he broke all contact and ties with his former life. When he missed the funeral of his closest friend because no one could reach him to break the news, he finally decided to come out. During an interview with a local reporter he was asked whether he could be identified as part of a gay couple. "Why not?" Bean replied. "It's time to grow up."

Brutally honest, *Going the Other Way* discuss-



es Billy's hopes and dreams and how the burgeoning awareness of his sexuality threatened to crush his aspirations. "The reflexive connection between homophobia and athletics had been hardwired into me since I stepped onto the football field at the age of 8," he writes.

Filled with insider information about the big leagues, this is the tale of a man who went to extraordinary lengths to hide and now is on a mission to nudge baseball toward equality for everybody. **J**

From high-five to down and out

The real first openly gay major league baseball player

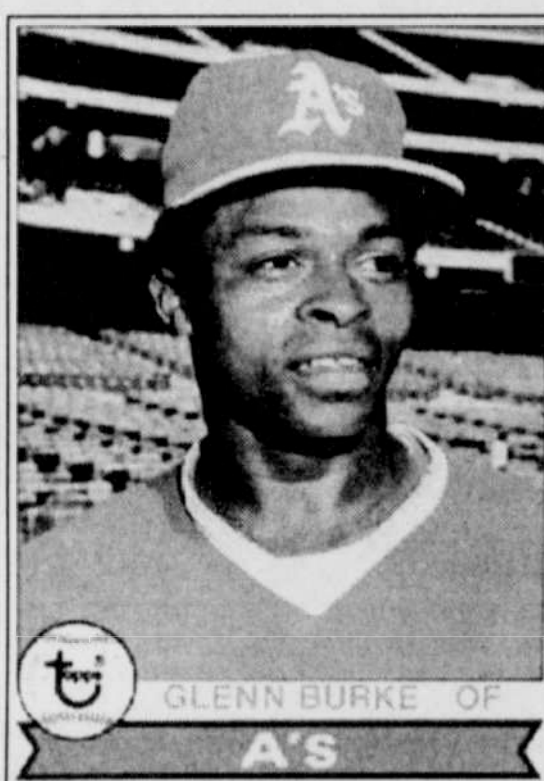
Going the Other Way promotes Billy Bean as "the only openly gay former major league baseball player." That campaign is misleading. The real first openly gay former major league baseball player died in 1995.

In 1972 Glenn Burke, then 20, was recruited by the Los Angeles Dodgers and sent to play in the minor leagues before being called on for "the show." Weighing 220 pounds with 17-inch biceps and "built like a fucking tank," his teammates nicknamed him King Kong.

Burke's four years in the majors were mediocre. He had a .237 batting average with 35 stolen bases, but he made a lasting mark on the game by inventing the high-five. In 1977 the Dodgers were playing the Houston Astros, and teammate Dusty Baker sent his 30th home run of the year over the right field wall. The enthusiastic Burke raced out to meet him at home plate. He raised his hands and Baker matched him—allegedly the first high-five in history.

Although Burke didn't come out publicly until after he left the majors in 1982, he didn't keep his sexuality secret from his teammates, even going so far as to befriend the effeminate gay son of Dodgers manager Tommy LaSorda (a notorious bigot).

Burke put it bluntly in his 1995 autobiography, *Out at Home: The Glenn Burke Story*: "They knew



Glenn Burke was finally drummed out of the majors in 1982 because he was gay

I was gay and were worried about how the average father would feel about taking his son to a baseball game to see some fag shagging fly balls in center field." The Dodgers offered him a honeymoon bonus if he'd find a woman to marry, but he refused. At the end of his second season he was traded to the Oakland A's.

But Oakland was no more welcoming, despite being directly across the bay from San Francisco, where Burke was a fixture in the Castro bars. Other players began wearing towels in the locker room and making predictable jokes about not bending over in the shower.

In 1980 the A's hired macho Billy Martin as manager, who proceeded to make Burke's life miserable by announcing during spring training that "no faggot was going to play on my ball club." When Burke hurt his knee, the A's sent him down to the minors.

At 28, with no other team willing to sign him, Burke was essentially blacklisted for being gay, and his career was over. He became a heavy cocaine user and spent 17 months in San Quentin on several charges. He died of AIDS complications in 1995 at the home of his sister.

"They can't ever say now that a gay man can't play in the majors," Burke said in a 1993 interview, "because I'm a gay man, and I made it."

—FS **J**

Come out, come out, wherever you are...

Despite the recent high-profile coming-outs of ex-baseball player Billy Bean and ex-football player Esera Tuaolo, professional sports remain extremely homophobic.

In a 1993 interview, Glenn Burke, the first openly gay professional baseball player, claimed he knew "at least 10 active or recently retired major league players who are gay or bisexual." He alleged that of the four major team sports—baseball, basketball, football and hockey—the National Football League had the most gay players.

Just last year, New York Mets catcher Mike Piazza denied rumors that he was gay after manager Bobby Valentine set off a media frenzy by saying that players can accept an openly gay teammate. And in May 2001, *Out* magazine publisher Brendan Lemon urged a closeted pro baseball player ("Not his team's biggest star but a very recognizable media figure all the same") with whom he was having an affair to come out.

Athletes in solo sports seem to have an easier time being open about their sexuality. Gay

swimmers Greg Louganis, Diana Nyad and Mark Tewksbury and tennis stars including Amélie Mauresmo, Gigi Fernandez and Conchita Martinez (who are partners on and off the court) bring gay fans to the stands.

Perhaps no other sport tops figure skating for queerness. One Web site lists 21 elite skaters who are publicly out, including Brian Orser, Rudy Galindo, Toller Cranston and John Curry.

—FS **J**

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