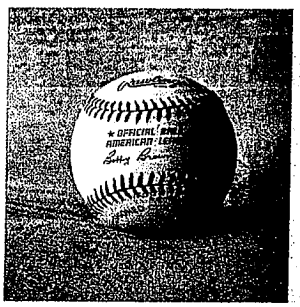
OLD SOX

and One New England Yankee



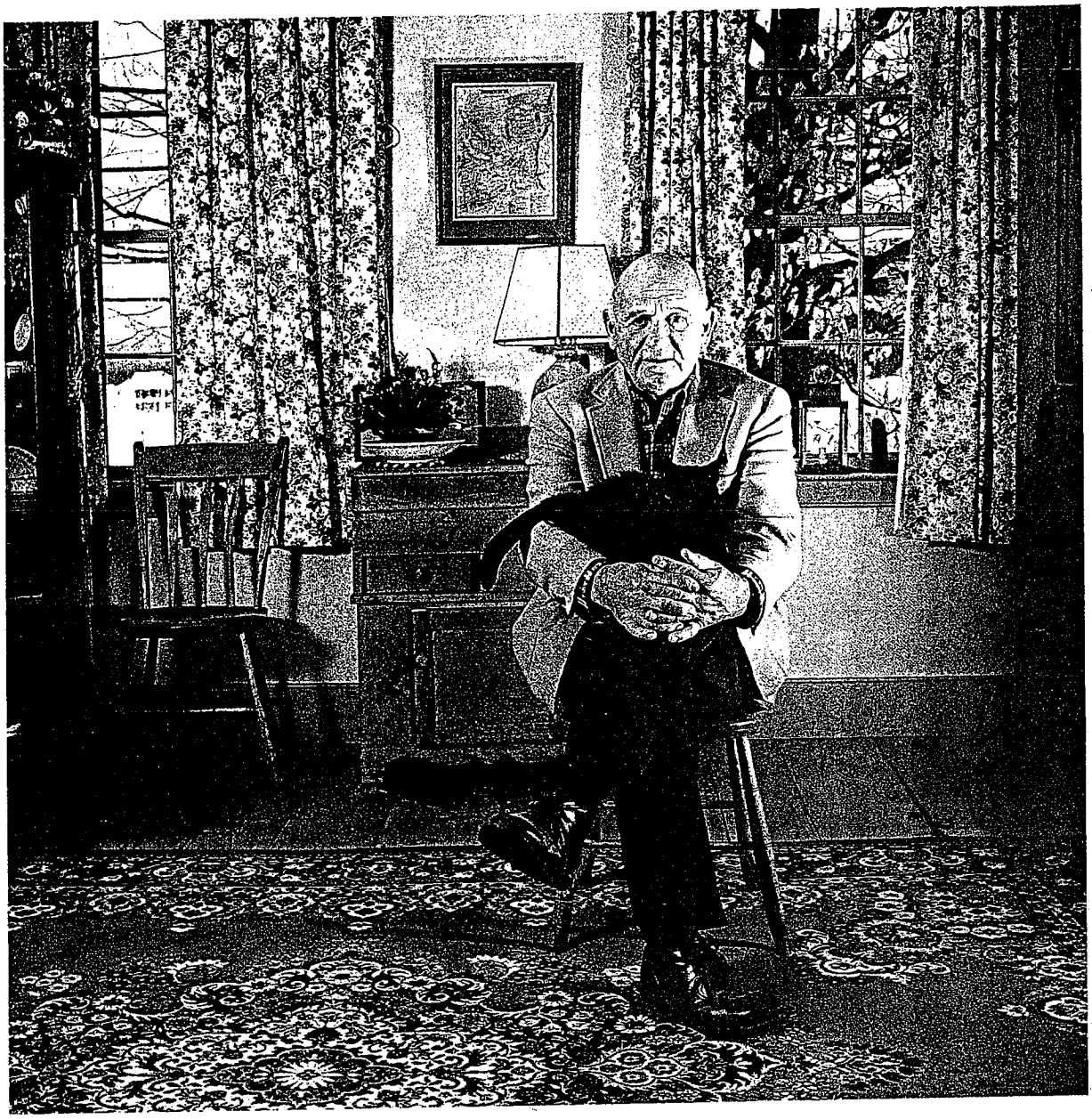
Photographs by William Coupon

Interviews by Conn Nugent

BEGIN WITH THE GRASS, that green place where all baseball starts. Listen for the shouts of the crowd, the bark of the vendors. Then cast your glance through the shafts of sunlight over to the boys in white, the red letters blazoned on their chests. So young they are, so skilled, so damnably blessed!

Now, hold the image, fix it in the mind, and wait — wait for the years to pass. The boys in white are older now, but they're different in other ways, too: some grateful and some angry, some infinitely wiser and some grasping at what is no longer possible. For all of them, though, one thing remains the same: their dreams of Fenway, where the grass is forever green.

The photographs of Luis Tiant, George Scott, and Bill Lee were taken at the Red Sox Exchange Camp in Winter Haven, Florida.



Tony Lupien

First base, 1940; 1942–43

SIX YEARS AGO, Tony Lupien co-wrote a book called *The Imperfect Diamond*. "The game is the most perfect game God ever put on the earth," he said. "The imperfection is off the field, with the administrators." Today, about to turn sixty-nine, he still wrestles with the platonist's dilemma of a pristine game in a world of knaves. He ponders solutions — all plausible — for the improvement of things.

He was raised in a baseball-mad, four-son French Canadian household in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. He went to the Loomis School in Connecticut, from there to Harvard, into the Red Sox system, and then to Fenway, where he replaced Jimmie Foxx at first base in 1942. He was traded to the Phillies in 1944, and in 1945 he joined the service. "And then I got into a jam. The G.I. Bill of Rights said every ex-serviceman had the opportunity to get his job back. The Phils sold me to the minors without providing that opportunity." Lupien threatened to sue in federal court. Eventually, he settled but got tagged, he says, with "a reputation as a Bolshevik."

Two years in the Coast League, a last chance at the bigs in 1948, then five seasons as a minor league manager. His wanderings ended in 1956, when he was named head coach at Dartmouth. Lupien and his family settled on a hillside across the river in Norwich, Vermont, and he found success and esteem and his measure of content. Retired now, he sells some stocks, he chops some wood, and, he says, he thinks about baseball every day.

Bill Lee

Pitcher, 1969–78

"THEY SAY I'm right out of Marx and Engels," the Spaceman says. "But I'm the archconservative of baseball: no designated hitter; real turf; close proximity of fans to players. *They* are the radicals of change." *They* are the owners and general managers and money changers, and Bill Lee still holds them in contempt.

He was Boston's best left-handed pitcher in the 1970s, and threw capably for Montreal when the Red Sox banished him from Fenway. His big-league career ended in 1982, but not his life in baseball. He went to New Brunswick — "the only place in North America where I was allowed to play" — and became the player-coach of the Moncton Mets, no salary. Last year, at thirty-eight, he had an ERA of 0.53 and a .380 batting average. "It's heaven," he says. "The ground is always soft, the fences are always short, and most of the hitters are left-handed hockey players." In winter he goes to Venezuela or Mexico or wherever there's a team that wants him. "The baseball diamond is like a Tibetan prayer wheel. The more times around, the better."

It hasn't been easy. He's moved a lot and has endured an acrimonious divorce. His ex-wife got the duplex in Belmont, and he misses Boston. He says he plans to return to New England "to set up a survival school," teaching his students "how to play baseball and live harmoniously on the planet."

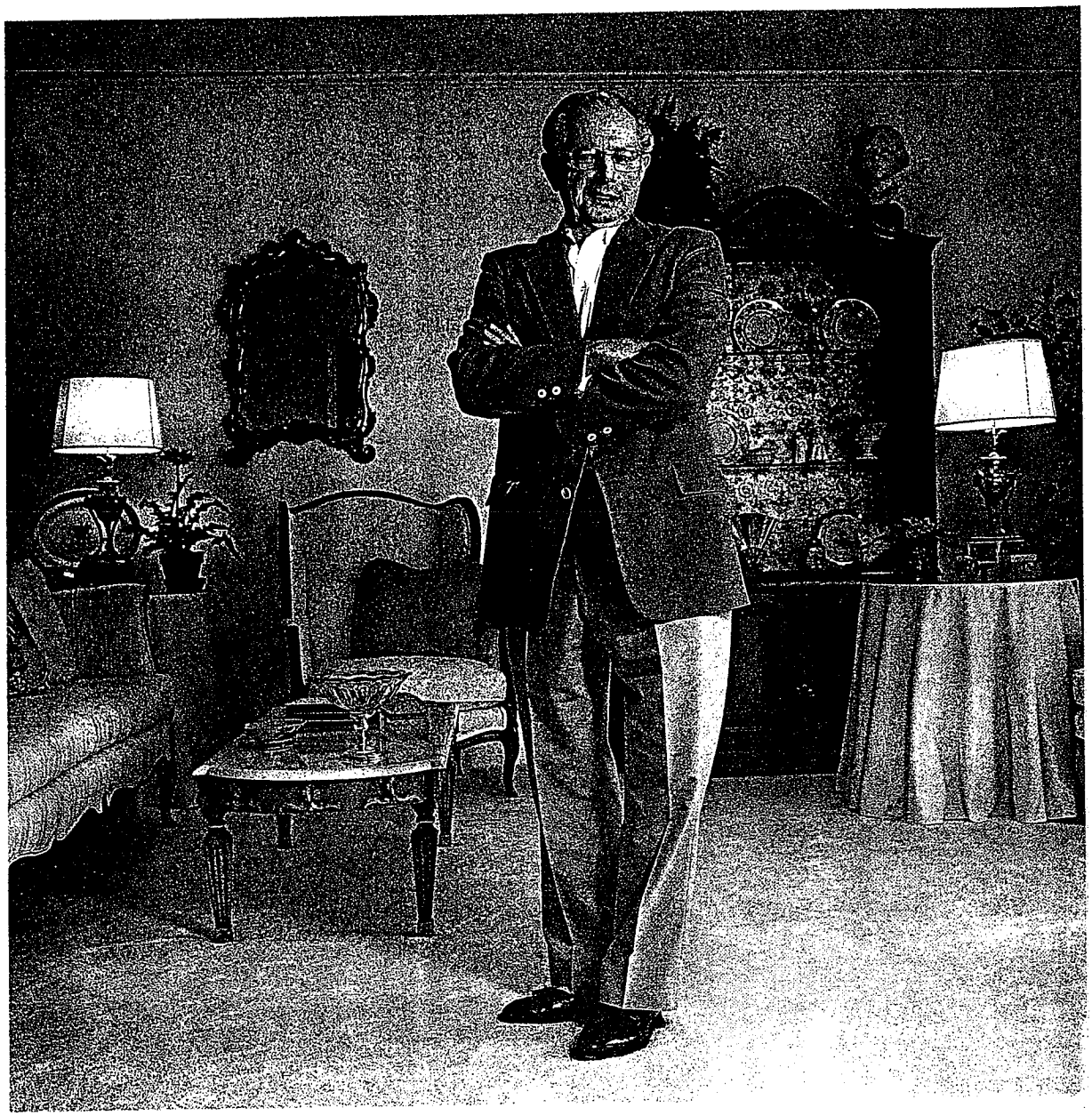
Walt Dropo

First base, 1949–52

BOSTON stretches below the window near Walter Dropo's desk on the thirty-first floor of Harbor Towers. He is six feet five inches tall, he is not thin, he smokes large cigars, he spends some of his time in the Far East, he is sixty-three. "Boston is Boston," he says, looking out the window. "I love this city."

Although he has an "insurance sideline" that arranges retirement plans for state employees, Dropo's main business is American Importers, "specialists in Chinese artifacts." The firm wholesales many items, but the staple is fireworks — formal displays for states in which home pyrotechnics are outlawed, consumer products ("Screaming Rebel," "Dixie Beauty") primarily for the legal trade in the old Confederacy. He is doing very well.

Dropo grew up in a Serbian immigrant family in Moosup, in eastern Connecticut. His hometown and his build inevitably made him a "Moose" when he reached the Red Sox. He would, in time, spend thirteen creditable seasons in the majors, but strangely, maybe unfairly, his first full year was the best. It was extraordinary, in fact: Dropo batted .322, hit 34 home runs, drove in 144 runs. "It was a glorious time," he remembers. "I never could have had another year like it. Probably no rookie will ever have a year like it." It was, he says, hard to learn "that I was a good player, like a Hodges or a Kluszewski, but not a Mantle or a Mays. I couldn't run. I was slow afoot." Walter Dropo shrugs, smiles, takes in the view.



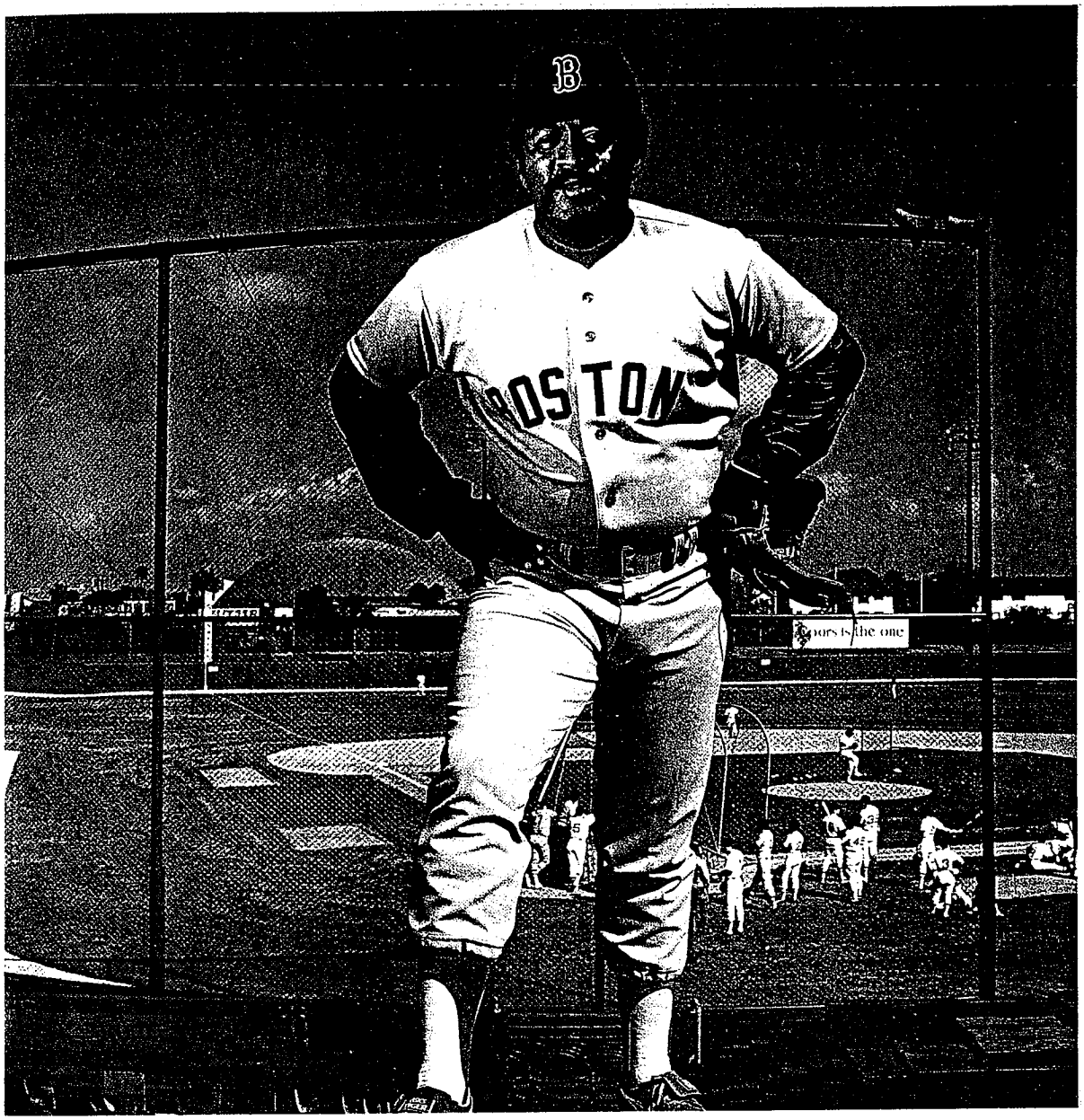
Dominic DiMaggio

Outfield, 1940–42; 1946–53

THEY CALLED Dominic DiMaggio the Little Professor for his sober mien and his glasses. He was a splendid terror on the diamond, a considerable offensive force and without peer as an outfielder. He was chronically undervalued, in the shadow of his brother Joe.

But when he retired in 1953, DiMaggio simply shifted gears. "I had always made preparations for the time to come," he says. He and some partners bought a building in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and from scratch developed the American Latex Fibre Corporation. DiMaggio and the firm prospered, and if you tore up your stereo speakers and automobile carpets, you'd find the evidence: "a nonwoven industrial fiber fabric, porous and resilient, with various applications for cushioning and sound deadening." He bought out his associates in 1958 and turned the business over to his son three years ago.

DiMaggio, sixty-nine now, lives in Florida most of the year but spends summers on Buzzards Bay. He buys and sells securities, tends real estate, devours business journals. "I'm busy, and I enjoy everything I do," he says. He regrets only "my inability to become at least a part-owner of a major league baseball team." He and some partners bid for the Red Sox after Tom Yawkey's death. But "the die was already cast," he says, for the insider coalition of Yawkey's widow, Jean, and Haywood Sullivan. Dominic DiMaggio hasn't returned to Fenway since.



Luis Tiant

Pitcher, 1971–78

WHEN Luis Tiant hears an old teammate complain about not finding a good job, he tells him, "You'll never find it. There are no good jobs after baseball." He was a professional ballplayer for twenty-five years, in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States. Now he lives outside Sacramento, does promotional work for Miller beer, and plays golf; he gave up his trademark cigars almost a year ago, when his wife, Maria, started to run faster than he could. His life, he says, is "okay, but it's too quiet." He and Maria hatch plans for Boston. "In Massachusetts, everyone knows me; they stop me on the street."

What the Tiants miss about Boston is the friendship of their Milton neighbors, less so the company of old ballplayers. "When you're through with this game, you're lucky to have a handful of baseball friends," he says. Bill Lee called him "the soul of the Red Sox," but Tiant, who is forty-five now, demurs. "No, we can look like family, but that's bullshit. Sometimes you go through hell."

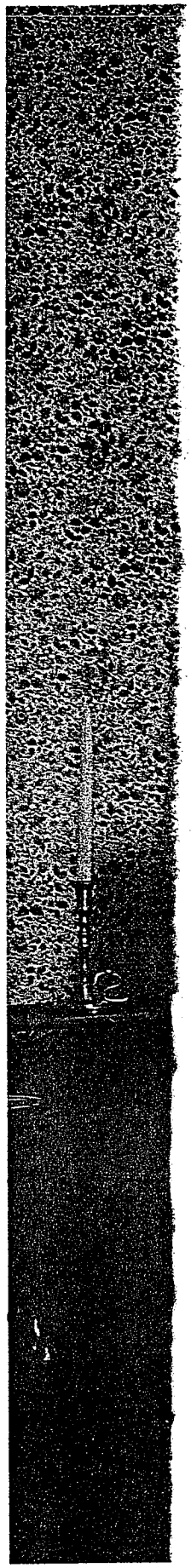
Jim Lonborg

Pitcher, 1965–71

TODAY, James R. Lonborg, D.M.D., runs a one-man dental practice in Hanover, on Massachusetts's South Shore. "Technique-sensitive work" requires a patient's cooperation, he says, and Dr. Lonborg is a soothing explainer. "You're probably wondering what I'm going to do with this little piece of red wax," he tells the wary eight-year-old. "Well, here's the idea . . ." He maintains a busy, six-days-a-week schedule. He will turn forty-three this month.

Why dentistry? "It promised all the things that could lead to a happy life after baseball," he says. "A job in health care, which has always interested me; the potential for reasonably good earnings; a variable routine; the chance to be my own boss." He is a determined rationalist, a Stanford graduate who prefers the "more conservative life-style" of New England to that of his native California.

Lonborg had a successful pitching career with Milwaukee and Philadelphia after leaving the Red Sox in 1971. But 1967, the pennant year, still provides the gold of his memories. He won 22 games and struck out 246 batters, but the great day was October 1, when he won the clincher at Fenway. Who can forget it? "Seeing Rico catch that pop-up," he remembers. "Having the stands erupt in joy. Such joy shared with so many. Strangers who were friends."



Eddie Pellagrini

Infield, 1946–47

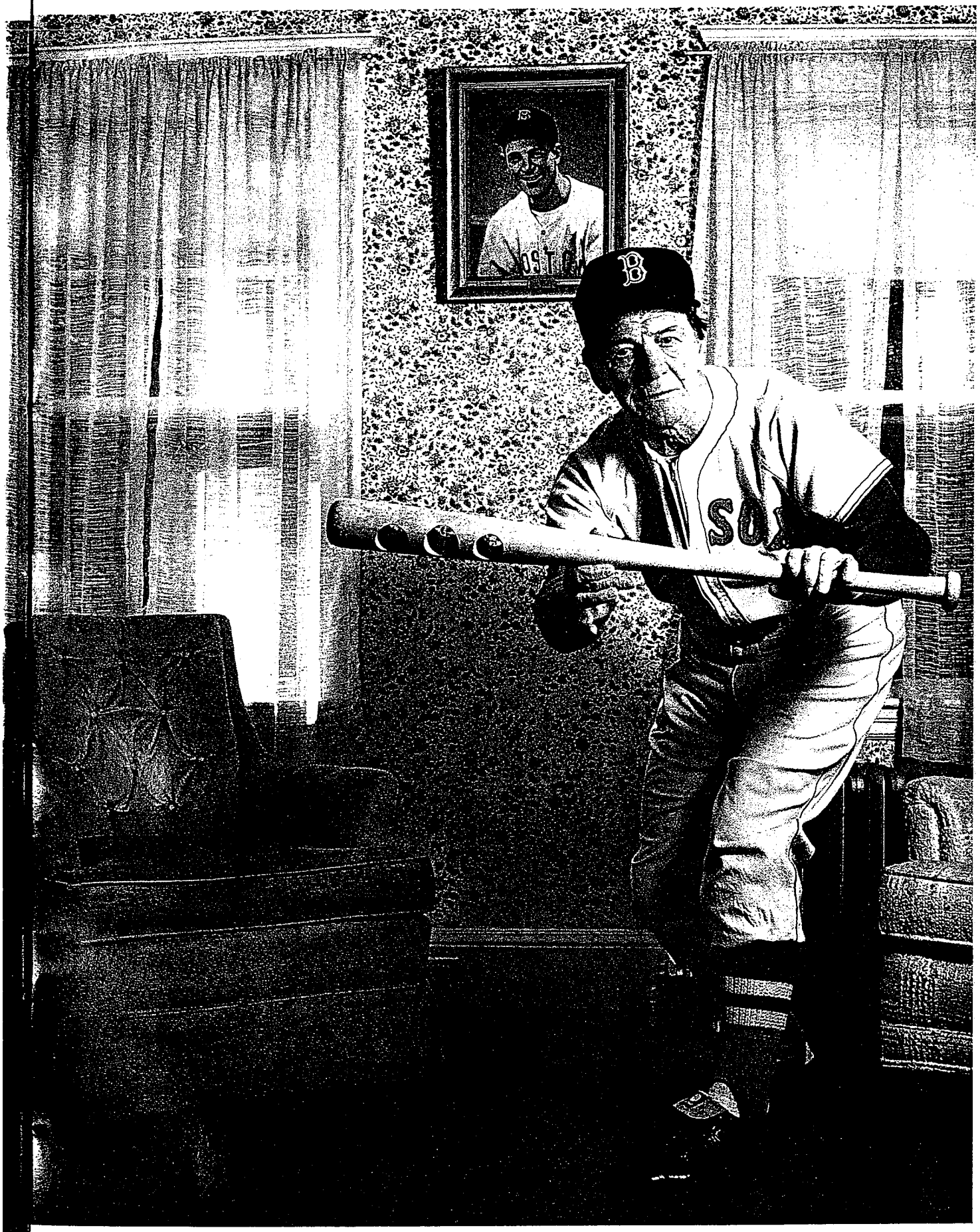
IN THE first half of this century, great numbers of Irish and Italian and Polish kids from big cities played a lot of baseball. That urban Catholic baseball culture is virtually gone now, but a visit to Eddie Pellagrini's house in Weymouth, Massachusetts, provides a quick oral history of the era.

"I grew up in Dorchester during the Depression," he says. "Baseball was our life. It was tough getting a place to play, so I used to wake up at six and claim a field like a Spanish conquistador with his flag. We'd play all day." His father was a tailor at Filene's. "The bum ain't workin'," the father moaned, but the son had found his calling.

"I was always a shortstop and my team always won," he says. High school, minor leagues, a break for the war ("We won that, too"), then on to the Red Sox and the 1946 pennant. He was a slick fielder, not a great hitter (the porous bat in the photograph, says former teammate Sam Mele, was the one Eddie used). Pellagrini and the Red Sox disagreed on his worth, and he played out his days as a utility infielder for four other teams.

Although he set up a real estate business after his career ended, he's always thought of himself as a student of the game that the bigs have overlooked. "When you're a .300 hitter you become an expert on birth control, how to drive a Ferrari, whatever. When you're a .230 hitter, who listens?"

Still, Pellagrini was able to find his outlet: at sixty-eight, he's been head baseball coach at Boston College for twenty-nine years and runs the most popular baseball clinics in New England. He loves to read and learn, and will engage a visitor on any topic at all. But baseball is still the thing: "You lie in bed and you think about it. The pitcher releases the ball and there are eight guys behind him. And their minds are whirring with who fields what and where's the cutoff, and what if this and what if that. You need a computer. It's too fascinating."



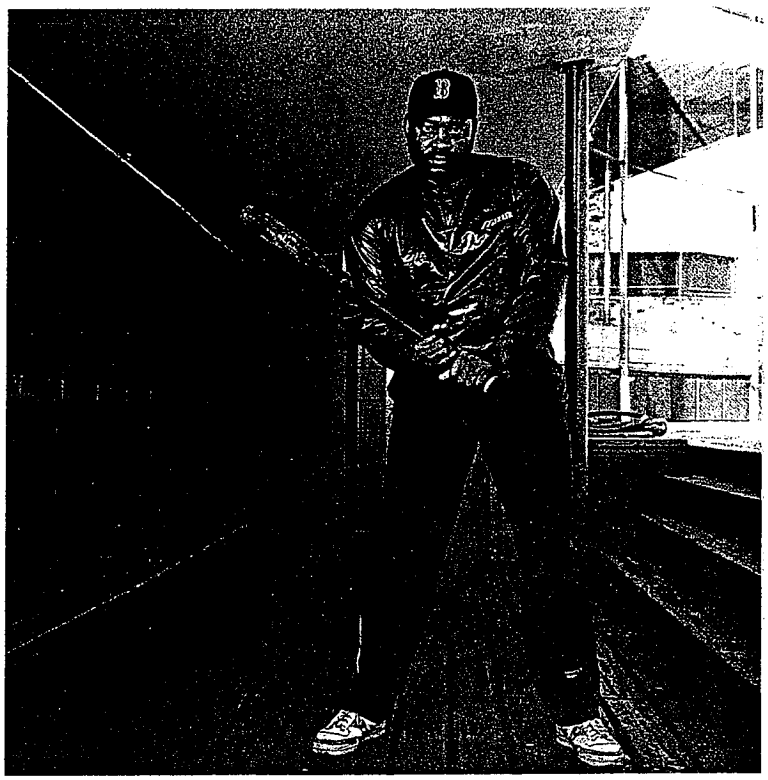
George Scott

First base and third base, 1966–71; 1977–79

"A HOME RUN is a beautiful feeling," says George Scott, who hit 271 of them. "The game stops for you. The camera is on you, the fans are on you. There's only one feeling that's better than going out and doing something well — I don't care what your work is — and walking away proud. There's only one thing I know that makes you feel better."

Today, the Boomer, who is forty-two, is looking for a job in the major leagues. "I would love to be a manager one day," he says. "When I was a player I was a manager in my own mind. I sat on the bench and followed every move. But I'd be a coach, too. I've put my words out there and anybody opens the door, I'm ready to work." For the past five years he's managed three different teams in the Mexican League. "I went to offer my talent, and they took it. It was a real experience — the good scenery, bad scenery, the rich people, the poor people. We've been spoiled in this country. We won't live in a house without wall-to-wall carpet, but for lots of those people, the carpet is earth."

Scott divides his year now between his mother's home in Mississippi — where speaking engagements and baseball clinics "make a couple of grand here, a couple of grand there" — and Massachusetts, where his children live with their mother in Falmouth. He waits for a phone call, and hopes it will be the Sox. "When you bust your hind for a team for nine years, and if you had a choice from Jump Street, it would be Boston," he says. "But it hurt me to hear they hired Al Bumbry [as a coach]. When someone's loyal to you, you help them out."



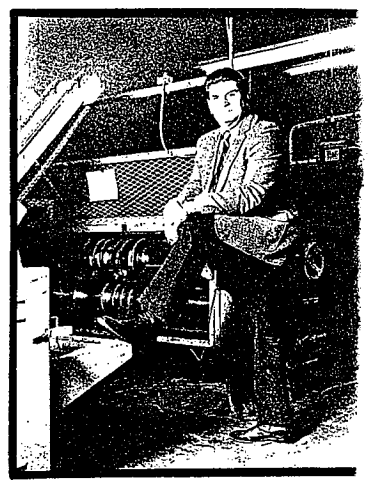
Dick Radatz

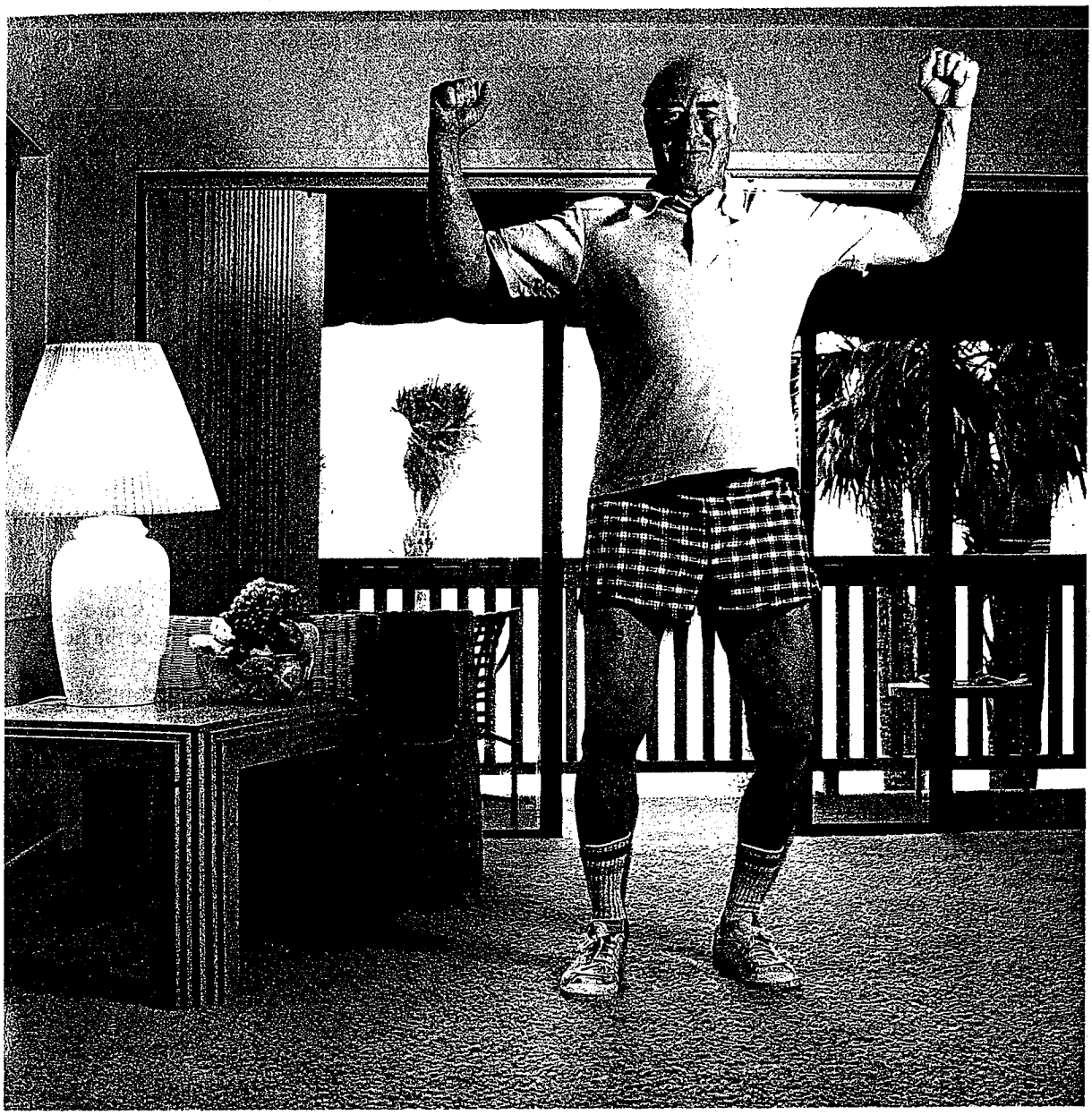
Pitcher, 1962–66

DICK RADATZ is enormous, six and a h
easily 300 pounds. In the mid-1960s he th
harder than anyone and terrorized th
League, in 1963–64 winning 31 games, sa
striking out 343 batters. He was The Mo
ey Mantle gave him the name after Radat
him out for the umpteenth time. Radatz
walking back to the dugout saying 'that l
ing-bleeping monster sunuvabitch.'"

Away from baseball, though, he's loo
gregarious. He likes his new job as Ne
sales representative for Atlantic Contain
tree, Massachusetts, manufacturers of
containers: "Fenway is one of my acc
know about half the players and do some
the club. I go down to the Sox Exchange
winter. I love seeing the guys."

Radatz, who turns forty-nine this
wants to work on behalf of old ballplay
their luck. "There are some great g
brooms out there and not getting by," h
have to get the players today to be m
with the pension. They can afford it."





Vic Raschi

Pitcher, New York Yankees, 1946–53

In 1935 a scout for the Yankees came to watch a Massachusetts high school baseball game. The winning pitcher was Vic Raschi, a Springfield sixteen-year-old. "The scout talked to my father," Raschi recalls, "and that very night he came to our house and we signed a conditional contract." From 1948 through 1952, Raschi averaged 20 wins a year for the Yankees. Cruel irony! At a time when the Sox were at the edge of competitiveness, a New England boy did more than anyone to keep them at bay. "I could always handle the Red Sox," he says. The worst blow fell on the final day of the 1949 season, with the Yanks and Sox tied for first. Raschi was the Yankee pitcher: "A great game. Sweaty palms, hard breathing, no talking." Coasting on a 5–0 lead, he ran into trouble in the ninth. "Tommy Henrich came walking over to talk to me. I said, 'Give me the goddamn ball.' I got 'em out the rest of the way." The Sox would come no closer until 1967.

In 1955 Vic Raschi bought a liquor store near his home on Conesus Lake, New York, south of Rochester. He retired in 1984 but keeps busy with odd jobs and daily exercise.

"I saved this story for last. The day the Yankees sold me to Saint Louis, I called my mother in Springfield. 'Mom,' I say, 'I got sad news. The Yankees sold my contract.'

"'I'm happy,' she says.

"'Mom! What do you mean by happy?'

"'I always wanted you to be a Boston Red Socker.'"