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The Gentleman Called Killer

Joe Posnanski, Sports Illustrated-5/17/11

The gentleman the sportswriters somewhat desperately called “Killer” was just 23 years old in 1959 — but by then Harmon Killebrew already had played parts of six seasons in the major leagues. Six seasons. He was of that peculiar bonus baby time, when owners (as owners tend to do) went looking for convoluted and spectacularly destructive methods to control their own spending. Certainly, they might have controlled spending by not spending as much money. But that was deemed unrealistic.

And so, in those days, if a team signed a player for too much money, it had to carry the player on the big league team for two years. This of course, was to discourage owners from paying players too much money — it would be like corporations deciding, as a cost-cutting measure, that if they spent too much money on a college graduate, they would be forced by law to make him or her a vice president.

Harmon Killebrew had been recommended to the Washington Senators by an actual senator, Idaho Republican Herman Welker, who would mainly be known to history for two unrelated things:

1. Being so closely allied with the reckless demagogue Joe McCarthy that he became known as “Little Joe from Idaho.”
2. Recommending Harmon Killebrew.

The Washington Senators, the baseball team, took Welker’s advice and sent out former third baseman Ossie Bluege to see Killebrew play in a few Idaho sandlot games. Killebrew, as legend goes, responded by getting 12 hits in 12 at-bats, including four homers and three triples. The Senators owner Clark Griffith giddily signed Killebrew for \$30,000 — the team’s first bonus baby.

And so Killebrew was a part of the team. He made his major league debut six days before his 18th birthday. Here is a fun little baseball trivia question that might win you a bar bet: What position did Killebrew play in his major league debut?

Answer: The great but not particularly swift Harmon Killebrew debuted as a pinch-runner.

He got just 15 plate appearances that first year, and 89 plate appearances in his second. He hit his first big league home run five days before he turned 19. He hit the home run at Griffith Stadium off Billy Hoelt, with his Senators down 13-0. He hit another one two days later off of George Zverink, but that pretty much summed up his achievements that second year. In 89 plate appearances, Killebrew hit an even .200 and was promptly sent to Charlotte for more seasoning.

The point is that by 1959, Harmon Killebrew was no phenom. He had been up and down so many times that his name was achingly familiar to Senators fans (and this was right in the prime of the Senators’ “First in war, first in peace, last in the American League” glory). Killebrew had hit .224 in 280 plate appearances scattered over his first five seasons. He is the only Hall of Fame player to get fewer than 500 total plate appearances in his first five years. This is not to say that

anyone in the game had given up on Killebrew's future. It's more that his promise had dulled. Albie Pearson won Rookie of the Year in 1958; people were more excited about him.

But the truth is that Killebrew was just 23 years old, and he had not been given that gift that every great player, without exception, needs: a chance to play. In 1959, the Senators gave him that chance. Why not? They put Killebrew at third base and kept him there. At the end of April, his average was hovering in the low .200s. He had crushed a long homer off Jack Harshman on Opening Day, but he only had three homers by the end of the month. He had also committed the first of what would be 30 errors.

Then, the blossoming of Harmon Killebrew happened. It was not gradual. It was instant. On May 1, 1959, Harmon Killebrew hit two home runs at Briggs Stadium in Detroit. There were fewer than 2,000 people in the stands — the Tigers were dreadful; they had lost 13 of their first 15 games. Killebrew homered in the second inning off a good young pitcher named Jim Bunning. In the 10th inning, with the score tied, Killebrew hit another homer off Bunning.

The next day, still in Detroit, Killebrew hit two more homers. He hit the first in the first inning off Jerry Davie. He hit the second off George Susce with the Senators up 12-3.

Two days after that, he homered in Chicago off Claude Raymond. After two more dry days, he again hit two home runs, this time at Yankee Stadium. He hit the first off Bob Turley, the other off Johnny Kucks. People were beginning to notice a bit now. On May 12, back at home, he had his fourth two-homer game in less than two weeks — off of Detroit's Frank Lary and Ray Narleski.

On May 17, in the second game of a doubleheader, he had his fifth two-homer game, one off Bob Shaw, the other off Turk Lown.

That made 11 homers in 17 games — including five two-homer games — and suddenly Harmon Killebrew was a sensation. Well, it wasn't really sudden. It was like Mel Brooks said: "It only took me 20 years to become an overnight sensation."

Still, it felt sudden. Reporters started to look more closely at Killebrew. They found that he had a little bit of the Heartland folk hero in him. His grandfather, Culver Killebrew, was said to be wrestling champion of the Union Army and, according to his great granddaughter Diane Killebrew Holt, he was able to stand flatfooted and jump over a horse. Harmon's father, Harmon Sr., whom everyone called Clay, was a college football star who played professionally with the Wheeling Steelers. Teammates, coaches and reporters told countless stories about Harmon's amazing feats of strength. They saw him hit home runs while breaking bats. They saw him lift up teammates like they were large pillows.

Naturally, the reporters began to call him Killer. The nickname, in many ways, was an absurdity. "Killer" fit Killebrew the way "Jazz" fits Utah or "responsible" fits government. He was so quiet and gentle that, when one reporter asked him if he had any hobbies, Killebrew said, without apparent irony, that he liked washing dishes at home. He had married his high school sweetheart, and they were raising a family, and there was just nothing violent about his nature. As Barbara Heilman wrote in *Sports Illustrated*: "You can't look an abstraction of amiability in the eye and call it 'Killer,' day after day, no matter how hard it hits."

But what else could they call him? Sure, the reporters, perhaps overeagerly, also tried "Charmin' Harmon," "Harmin' Harmon," "Bombin' Harmon," "Hammerin' Harmon," and so on. But when you have a man named Killebrew who hits home runs, "Killer" is inescapable. Plus, it fit so much better into headlines.

Killebrew's amazing home run stretch in 1959 more or less carried on for the next dozen years. It was his fate to play baseball in the worst hitting era since Deadball, and yet from 1959 through 1970 — 12 years dominated by pitchers — Killer hit a home run every 12.7 at-bats. Up to that point, only Babe Ruth had hit home runs so often. Forty-five times in his career Killebrew hit two homers in a game. Six times he led the league in home runs. Eight times he hit 40-plus homers in a season.

He was a low-average hitter — he spent a career fighting to make more solid contact — but he was a ferocious worker, and he developed remarkable plate discipline. "If it isn't a strike, don't swing," he said years later when asked his

philosophy of hitting. He led the league in walks three times, and despite those low batting averages, from 1966 through 1971 he led the American League in overall on-base percentage (.401). He wasn't fast or particularly nimble, and so playing defense was always a challenge, but he played five different positions, and he played hard, and observers will say he wrestled first base to a draw.

As a hitter, he was ahead of his time. His high-walk, big-power numbers would anticipate the 1990s, when various factors — steroids not being the least of these, though weight training and advances in diet and so on played their role — would give many players the superhuman strength of Harmon Killebrew. At the time, though, Killebrew was different. He was larger than life.

And, as a person, he was endlessly gracious. When word spread late last week that Harmon Killebrew was no longer going to fight the esophageal cancer that had struck him, that he was ready to accept his fate, there were a thousand stories told of Killebrew's small kindnesses, bits of advice he gave to players, moments he took to talk with fans, compliments he gave to umpires, smiles he offered to anyone who caught his eye. Killebrew died on Tuesday. He was 74 years old. He will live on in baseball's record books, of course, for his 573 home runs and a homer hit per 14.22 at-bats (a better ratio than Mickey Mantle, Ted Williams and Sammy Sosa — this though he played in a pitcher-dominated era) and his place in the Hall of Fame. But wouldn't we all want to be remembered for making countless people's days brighter?

The irony of calling him Killer was brought up many times throughout his life, though it is also true that Harmon Killebrew was intentionally walked more times than any other American League player in the 1960s. So the nickname isn't that crazy. At the plate, he was a killer. His short, quick swing was the very image of power — so much so that for years it was said that the MLB logo was drawn in his image. The man who created the logo said that it was not Killebrew. But it looks like him. And it should be him.

People sometimes throw around the concept of a hitter being feared. Mostly, it's kind of nonsensical. Baseball players generally don't fear each other. But in a peculiar way they did fear Harmon Killebrew — or anyway, they feared what he was capable of doing at his best. Which leads, finally, to the story of George Brunet. He had quite a life. He was an American League pitcher, a lefty, who grew up on the Upper Peninsula. He struck out more than three thousand batters in the MINOR LEAGUES, which is a record, and he threw 55 shutouts in the Mexican League, which is a record, and he might be best known for his role in Jim Bouton's Ball Four as the quirky lefty who did not wear underwear because that way, as he said, he didn't have to worry about losing them.

Brunet also pitched 15 years for nine different teams in the big leagues. His battles with Harmon Killebrew were particularly interesting. In one game, in 1966, Brunet intentionally walked Killebrew three times — twice with a man on second base, and once with runners on second and third.

Well, it just so happened that the Twins did not score any of the times that Killebrew was walked, which seemed a pretty good deal to Lefty Brunet. That's especially true because they faced each other four days later ... and Killebrew homered. Less than two months later, they again matched up ... and Killebrew homered. Four days after that, they faced each other again ... and Killebrew homered again.

And that was when Lefty Brunet decided that he had seen quite enough of Harmon Killebrew. For the rest of his career, when George Brunet and Harmon Killebrew crossed paths, Brunet worked very hard to walk the Killer. And then finally there was the last time they faced each other, Aug. 22, 1970. That was Harmon Killebrew's last 40-homer season, and it was Brunet's last full season. They had faced each other 62 times — sort of a mini-marriage — and Brunet had won some (Killebrew hit only .250 against him) and Killebrew won some (he walked 22 times and mashed four home runs) and this was the last act. The score was tied 4-4, it was the fifth inning and there was nobody on base.

George Brunet intentionally walked Harmon Killebrew. He then coaxed Rich Reese to hit into a double play to end the inning. When asked about the decision to intentionally walk Killebrew with the bases empty — it was the third time he had done that — Brunet returned with a question of his own: What would you do?

Harmon Killebrew dies at 74

ESPN.com News Services, 5/17/11

Minnesota Twins great Harmon Killebrew died Tuesday at his Scottsdale, Ariz., home, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and the team jointly announced. Killebrew, who had esophageal cancer, was 74.

Killebrew announced recently that the cancer had been deemed incurable by his doctors and he was entering hospice care.

"With the continued love and support of my wife, Nita, I have exhausted all options," Killebrew said in a statement Friday. He added: "I have spent the past decade of my life promoting hospice care and educating people on its benefits. I am very comfortable taking this next step and experiencing the compassionate care that hospice provides."

Killebrew is 11th on baseball's all-time home run list with 573.

Killebrew was receiving treatment at a branch of the Mayo Clinic nearby after his diagnosis in December. He expressed optimism at the time, saying he expected to make a full recovery while acknowledging he was in "perhaps the most difficult battle" of his life.

Killebrew was able to travel to Fort Myers, Fla., in March for his annual stint as a guest instructor at spring training with the Twins. He was in good spirits and appeared healthy, only thinner, quipping that manager Ron Gardenhire gave him the OK to show up a little late. He said he relished the opportunity to immerse himself in baseball and divert his focus from the treatment and the disease.

But his plan to throw out the first pitch at the team's home opener in April was scrapped. He said then in a statement that such a trip would disrupt his treatment schedule, though he remained hopeful for a recovery.

Killebrew made 11 All-Star appearances during a 22-year career spent mostly with the Washington Senators and the Twins when they moved to Minnesota in 1961. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1984 and was fifth on the career home run list when he retired in 1975 after one season with the Kansas City Royals.

Killebrew's eight seasons with 40 or more homers is tied for second in league history to Babe Ruth. He won the American League MVP award in 1969, when the Twins won their division and lost to the Baltimore Orioles in the AL Championship Series.

The 49 homers, 140 RBIs and 145 walks he compiled that season remain Twins records.

In the plaza outside Target Field, there is a giant bronze glove where fans pose for pictures. It is the same distance from home plate, 520 feet, as the longest home run Killebrew ever hit. His No. 3 jersey is retired, and a replica was hung in the home team dugout, likely for the rest of the season. There's a statue in his likeness outside the ballpark, too, and two roses were left near the base of the statue on Friday.

Killebrew had maintained a regular presence around the Twins over the years. He made an effort to get to know almost all the current players, striking particularly close friendships with Michael Cuddyer, Justin Morneau and Jim Thome among others.

His nickname, "The Killer," defied his humble, gentle demeanor, but he sure could crush a baseball with that big bat of his.

"I didn't have evil intentions," Killebrew once said, "but I guess I did have power."

His home run totals turned out to be that much more impressive, given the smaller parks, watered-down pitching staffs and juiced balls and players that came in the decades after he retired.

Though Killebrew has been passed in recent years by Alex Rodriguez and Thome on the homer list to fall out of the top 10, he ought to be in 11th place for some time, particularly as dominant young pitchers have taken control of the post-

steroid era in baseball. With Manny Ramirez's sudden retirement last month, the next closest active players are Vladimir Guerrero and Chipper Jones with 440.

Albert Pujols, with 415 homers at age 31, might be the next threat to reach Killebrew's mark.

Twins legend, Hall of Famer Killebrew dies

Marty Noble, MLB.com 5/17/11

A man who wielded significant power in Washington, D.C., in the 1950s and is generally recognized as the first player to admire the parabolic trajectories of self-launched baseballs has died. Harmon Killebrew, slugger supreme, Hall of Famer and civic treasure in the Twin Cities, has joined the great majority, among whom he will stand with distinction because of achievement, friendly persuasion, unusual name and "Killer" nickname.

Killebrew succumbed to esophageal cancer Tuesday in Scottsdale, Ariz., at age 74. Diagnosis of the rare disease was made public in late December and he underwent treatment in Arizona, his adopted home state. But he began hospice care on May 13, issuing a statement that said, in part, "I have exhausted all options with respect to controlling this awful disease. My illness has progressed beyond my doctors' expectation of cure."

He is the fifth Hall of Famer to pass in slightly more than a year. The passing of Robin Roberts last May has been followed by the deaths of Sparky Anderson, Bob Feller, Duke Snider and now the slugger who, until 2009, had more home runs, 573, than any right-handed hitter in American League history.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew," Twins president Dave St. Peter said. "Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest."

A native of Idaho, Killebrew made his name in baseball in the nation's capital near the end of the '50s, underscored it many times in 14 summers playing for the Twins in Minnesota, wrapped up his career with one final season in Kansas City, and eventually found a permanent baseball address in Cooperstown, N.Y., among the most prominent names in the game's long history.

Harmon Clayton Killebrew was a name of distinction, to be sure. The Major Leagues has had no other player with Harmon as a first name and no other with the same surname.

Though he and fellow Hall of Famer Gaylord Perry played in different leagues until the slugger's career was winding down, Perry once referred to Killebrew as "Ma Bell" because he hit for long distance. Killer, Mickey Mantle, Willie McCovey and Frank Howard were the primary practitioners of the mammoth home run in the 1960s, when Killebrew won five of his six American League home run championships and a Most Valuable Player Award, played in a World Series and hit 393 home runs. No one hit more home runs in the decade.

And no one at the time lingered so long in the batter's box to admire his power-ball handiwork. Though the behavior seemed contrary to his modest personality, Killebrew is widely regarded to have been the first player to delay his home run trot in order to monitor, and perhaps admire, his launches. Reggie Jackson, Dave Parker, Rickey Henderson and Barry Bonds took it to new levels, but they were mimicking Killer.

He hit the longest measured home runs at Metropolitan Stadium and Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, and in 1962 was the first to clear the left-field roof at Tiger Stadium in Detroit.

He was a farm-strong man readily recognizable because of his broad shoulders, relatively short frame -- he was generously listed at 5-foot-11 -- minimal hair, and, when in uniform, his signature No. 3. He emerged as the Babe Ruth of

the Midwest, hitting more career home runs than all but Ruth, Henry Aaron, Willie Mays and Frank Robinson before his retirement at the end of the 1975 season. Until Alex Rodriguez passed him in 2009, Killebrew had hit more home runs in the American League than any right-handed hitter. His single-season home run total exceeded 40 eight times in his 14 seasons as a regular; he hit 39 once.

A nomad defensive player, he is one of three players to have hit at least 100 home runs at each of three positions -- first base, third base and left field.

Killebrew's 1,584 career RBIs rank in a tie for 36th place all-time. He led the league in RBIs three times, establishing his personal high, 140, in 1969, when he won the MVP. He placed in the top five in MVP balloting in five other years.

Hall of Fame status for Killebrew appeared to be a foregone conclusion when he retired, but he wasn't elected until 1984, his fourth year of eligibility.

Killer was revered in Minneapolis and St. Paul. A street alongside the Mall of America, built on the site of Metropolitan Stadium, where the Twins played, is named Killebrew Drive. His No. 3 was the first uniform number to be retired by the Twins in 1974, the year the team released him at age 38. His congeniality and unblemished personal resume only reinforced the popularity produced by his on-field achievements. He appeared in 2,435 games during his career and never was ejected. When his cancer was announced, former Twins teammate Tony Oliva said, "I tell everybody he's too nice to be a baseball player. He's a gentleman."

Earlier platitudes of that nature once prompted Killebrew to wonder aloud: "If I am such a nice guy, how'd I get this nickname?" He did so by bashing home runs to the farthest reaches of ballparks. He was as feared as any slugger. Dave DeBusschere, who made his athletic mark in the NBA, also pitched for the White Sox in 1962-63. He abandoned baseball, he said, for one reason: "Harmon Killebrew."

DeBusschere faced Killebrew four times -- struck him out, walked him and surrendered two home runs. The 443 other batters DeBusschere faced combined for eight. "I've got a better chance against Chamberlain," DeBusschere said years later. "Wilt's a lot bigger, but Harmon might have been stronger."

Killebrew's strength came from his Idaho upbringing, from hoisting 10-gallon milk cans onto trucks. Got milk? Indeed. It may be apocryphal, but his grandfather was said to be the strongest man in the Union army. He routinely won wrestling matches.

Killer's career was undermined by frequent debilitating injuries and also by the "bonus-baby" rule in effect when he signed with the Washington Senators in 1954. Because of the rule, the Senators were obligated to carry him on their big league roster for two seasons, so Killebrew didn't immediately benefit from the everyday Minor League schooling available to lesser prospects. Though his first turn at bat came at age 17 in '54, he had merely 280 plate appearances in the big leagues by the time he began playing regularly in 1959.

He hit 42 home runs that season, tying Rocky Colavito of the Indians for the league leadership and equaling the Senators' single-season record established two years earlier by Roy Sievers. Nine of the 11 highest single-season totals in Senators-Twins history were produced by Killebrew.

Idaho senator Herman Welker is said to have alerted the Senators of Killebrew's power and prowess. The Red Sox also pursued Killebrew as an amateur, but the Senators, at that time recognized for an ability to spot offensive potential, signed the Milkman for \$50,000.

Injuries, the most prominent of which occurred in the 1968 All-Star Game, were an issue for Killebrew. He was assigned to the disabled list for 55 days that summer after tearing his left hamstring while stretching for a throw at first base. He had merely 371 plate appearances, 48 following his return Sept. 1. He walked 70 times, but hit merely 17 home runs. He produced his finest season in 1969, when the Twins won the first American League West championship.

Killebrew endured financial and medical problems after retiring. He was reported to be \$700,000 in debt in 1989 following a foreclosure on his home the previous year. He suffered damage to his esophagus in 1990 when his lung collapsed. He was in serious condition and required a wheelchair during his convalescence.

But his health had been considered good until the announcement of cancer in December. Killebrew is survived by his second wife, Nita, and nine children from two marriages.

Minnesota Twins icon Harmon Killebrew dies

Pioneer Press 5/17/11

Minnesota Twins legend and Baseball Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew died this morning at home in Scottsdale, Ariz., the Twins announced today.

Killebrew, 74, had been diagnosed with esophageal cancer in December and last week announced that he was entering hospice care. Killebrew's wife, Nita, and family was with him when he died, the Twins said.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew," Twins president Dave St. Peter said in a statement. "Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest. However, more importantly Harmon's legacy will be the class, dignity and humility he demonstrated each and every day as a Hall of Fame-quality husband, father, friend, teammate and man. The Twins extend heartfelt sympathies and prayers to the Killebrew family at this difficult time."

Killebrew ranks 11th on baseball's career home run list with 573.

"Harmon Killebrew personified Hall of Fame excellence in every aspect of his dynamic life," National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum chairman Jane Forbes Clark said in a statement. "He will forever be remembered for his 573 career home runs and as the 1969 American League Most Valuable Player, and as one of the greatest hitters of his era. Since joining the Hall of Fame family in 1984, Harmon was a beacon of light among his fellow Hall of Famers, always smiling, always enjoying every moment that life delivered at his doorstep. We have so many fond memories of this wonderful baseball hero, and we will miss him enormously."

"Harmon was a Hall of Famer on and off the field," Jeff Idelson, Hall of Fame president Jeff Idelson, said in a statement. "He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity, and warmth, and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was 'Killer,' as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the earth."

Hall of Famer Killebrew dies at 74

AP, 5/17/11

MINNEAPOLIS

Harmon Killebrew, the Minnesota Twins slugger known for his tape-measure home runs, has died at his home in Scottsdale, Ariz. He was 74.

The team said Killebrew died peacefully Tuesday morning with his wife, Nita, and their family at his side.

He had announced in December that he had been diagnosed with esophageal cancer. Last week, Killebrew announced that doctors had deemed his cancer incurable and he would no longer fight it.

Killebrew hit 573 home runs during his 22-year career, 11th-most in major league history. His eight seasons with 40 or more homers still is tied for second in league history to Babe Ruth.

Hall of Famer and Twins legend Harmon Killebrew dead at age 74

Sporting News, 5/17/11

Baseball Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew died this morning at his home in Scottsdale, Ariz., at the age of 74.

In a statement released by the Minnesota Twins today, team president Dave St. Peter wrote: "No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew. Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest. However, more importantly Harmon's legacy will be the class, dignity and humility he demonstrated each and every day as a Hall of Fame-quality husband, father, friend, teammate and man. The Twins extend heartfelt sympathies and prayers to the Killebrew family at this difficult time."

Killebrew released a statement Friday in which he said he was stopping treatment for esophageal cancer and entering hospice care.

In a statement released jointly by the Minnesota Twins and the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Killebrew said "it is with profound sadness" that he will no longer receive treatment for the "awful disease."

He said the cancer has been deemed incurable by his doctors and he will enter hospice care.

"With the continued love and support of my wife, Nita, I have exhausted all options," Killebrew said. He added: "I have spent the past decade of my life promoting hospice care and educating people on its benefits. I am very comfortable taking this next step and experiencing the compassionate care that hospice provides."

During his 22-season major league career—21 of which were spent with the Twins—Killebrew hit .256 with 573 homers (which places him 11th all-time) and 1,584 RBIs. He was a 13-time All-Star, a six-time AL home run champion and the 1969 AL MVP.

Killebrew was selected as the Sporting News AL Player of the Year in 1969 and 1970. In addition, the slugger was named to the Sporting News AL All-Star team in 1964 as an outfielder, 1967 as a first baseman and 1969 and 1970 as a third baseman.

He played from 1954-1975, finishing his career with the Kansas City Royals.

Killebrew was no 'Killer,' except when it came to slugging

Scott Miller, CBS Sports 5/17/11

The thing I could never get over about Harmon Killebrew was how small he was.

Not tiny small. Not diminutive small. Just, well, regular-sized.

You meet a home-run hitter nicknamed "Killer," you don't expect that. You figure you're about to encounter some type of giant, menacing hulk. Rippling muscles. Fire breathing. Drug-store physique.

Killebrew was none of that. He was neither menacing, nor a hulk. Listed at 6-feet, 190 pounds, until cancer slipped a final fastball by him Tuesday, Killebrew was one of the nicest, most gracious and most dignified gentlemen you could ever meet.

Maybe in the long, colorful history of baseball nicknames -- Dizzy, Daffy, Three-Finger, Dummy -- never has one been so ill-fitting. Harmon Killebrew was quiet. He was polite. He was humble.

He would never brag on it, but man, did he ever leave a mark on this game. Just look at the MLB logo: The batter? For decades, many have believed it's Killebrew.

He spoke softly and carried a very big stick, a stick that launched 573 home runs over 22 Hall of Fame seasons. He ranks 11th on the all-time homer list and, yes, that's where the whole Killer thing emerged.

As the old Washington Senators infielder Ossie Bluege once said, "He hit line drives that put the opposition in jeopardy. And I don't mean infielders. I mean outfielders."

When they razed his old baseball home in Minnesota, Metropolitan Stadium, and turned it into the United States' biggest shopping mall, they left his mark. To this day, one of the prime attractions remains one red seat, still visible amid the maze of Banana Republics and Foot Lockers.

It is installed at the estimated location and elevation of the longest home run in Twins history, Killebrew's monstrous, 520-foot blast on June 3, 1967, against reliever Lew Burdette in a game against the California Angels.

Not many outside of Minnesota realize this, but there is a direct line tracing the landing spot of that home run in '67 to today's Twins and their new Target Field.

See, outside of Gate 34 -- the gate dedicated to Killebrew's Hall of Fame colleague Kirby Puckett -- there is a giant Gold Glove that is a perfect place to meet, or for a photo op. It is no coincidence that that Gold Glove is located exactly, yes, 520 feet from home plate.

You can't put into words the depth of Killebrew's meaning to the Twins and to baseball fans in Minnesota. But you can sure see it in the smiles of those who meet at that glove on summer nights, or by the Killebrew statue outside of Target Field.

Perfectly, that bronze statue captures Killebrew's follow-through at the plate. I assume he's just sent another baseball rocketing toward the Mississippi River, clear out of sight.

"Killebrew can knock the ball out of any park," the old Orioles manager Paul Richards once explained. "Including Yellowstone."

Far as anyone knows, Killebrew never did test Richards' theory. But he did groom that swing and grow that power not far from Yellowstone.

A native of tiny Payette, Idaho, Killebrew was "discovered" by Bluege at 17. By then, Bluege was the Senators' farm director, and owner Clark Griffith dispatched him to see some kid recommended by a real Senator, Idaho's Herman Welker.

At the time, Killebrew was planning to play football and baseball at the University of Oregon. Then Bluege watched the budding slugger hit a ball over the left-field fence, into a beet field, that the scout measured off the next day at 435 feet.

Line drives that put outfielders in jeopardy.

You expected anything but small from Killebrew, especially if you met him during a time when much smaller men like Barry Bonds literally grew right before our eyes. Inauthentic behemoths recently have rushed past him on the all-time homer list: Mark McGwire (10th), Sammy Sosa (seventh), Alex Rodriguez (sixth) and Bonds (first). Notably, the record book does not offer listings for integrity.

Like so many Hall of Famers who will live on in our memories, Killebrew came from another time and place. He was of our fathers, and of their fathers. A 13-time All-Star, he became the American League's Most Valuable Player in 1969 with 49 homers, 140 RBI and a still-incredible 145 walks. Killebrew was so feared he became one of the first players whom opponents frequently would intentionally walk (he ranks 15th all-time in walks).

"He was the meal ticket for our franchise for all those years in Washington and Minnesota," Calvin Griffith said, and when Killebrew finished his career in 1975 with one season in Kansas City, it seemed badly out of place, as if Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon suddenly relocated in Omaha.

First and always, he was a Twin. The first one elected to the Hall of Fame (in 1984). And, in so many ways, the face of the franchise until he took his final cuts at 74.

"A muscular slugger with monumental home run and RBI success," reads his Hall of Fame plaque.

Or, as 2011 Hall of Fame electee Bert Blyleven said, "A lumberjack of a ballplayer."

The Gentleman Slugger, he came from a time of beet fields and corner shops, not drive-thrus and megamalls.

But he fit oh so perfectly, just the right size for his day, and just the right shape for the ages.

Twins great Harmon Killebrew dies

La Velle E Neal III, Star Tribune 5/17/11

Harmon Clayton Killebrew, an iconic Minnesota Twin known for his prodigious home runs and humble demeanor, passed away Tuesday morning

Harmon Clayton Killebrew, an iconic Minnesota Twin known for his prodigious home runs and humble demeanor, passed away Tuesday morning at his Scottsdale, Ariz., home at the age of 74 after a nearly five-month battle with esophageal cancer.

Killebrew was the face of the Twins franchise for 14 seasons after the franchise moved to Minnesota from Washington, D.C. before the 1961 season. He is 11th on the all-time major league home run list with 573, of which 475 were hit wearing a Twins uniform. He has the eight highest single-season totals in Twins' history. And he became the team's first MVP in 1969 and its first Hall of Fame inductee in 1984.

Killebrew became so popular that a root beer was named after him. And his home runs were such a drawing crowd that then-owner Calvin Griffith made the slugger the team's first \$100,000 player in 1971.

Killebrew retained strong ties with Minnesota right up to his passing, making several appearances in the Twin Cities each year, and since 2006 making an annual trip to the Twins spring training camp.

"That was probably as good as a moment you can have as a manager, to say you were rubbing elbows with Harmon Killebrew," said Twins manager Ron Gardenhire.

Killebrew was diagnosed with the cancer during the last week of December, 2010, and vowed to do all he could to fight the disease. He made enough progress with chemotherapy and radiation treatments that he was allowed to visit camp in mid-March.

Although noticeably a few pounds lighter, Killebrew moved well and seemed to be his old self. He spoke of attending the home opener on April 8 and returning for his annual charity golf tournament June 29-30, which coincided with his 75th birthday.

Alas, he made neither.

"When you go through something like this, you're not really sure of what to expect," he said in March. "The thing that's really been an effect on me is how many people have reached out to me. That's one thing I want to say is to thank all of the people who sent cards and letters and e-mails and all of the well-wishes. It's really been overwhelming and special."

Powerful build

Killebrew played in one of the game's golden eras, with the likes of Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Ernie Banks, Mickey Mantle and Frank Robinson. Killebrew's monstrous home runs set him apart even among his future Hall of Fame peers.

He was only about 5 feet 11 but was 220 pounds -- a burly man with strong arms and stronger hands. He shook hands with such force that it would leave the recipient's hand tingling. But it was those arms, wrists and hands that gave Killebrew a terrific power stroke. His blasts would sail high into the air and carry and carry until they landed beyond the fence.

"Growing up in Southern California, for some reason my favorite players were Willie Mays, Carl Yazstrzemi and Harmon," Hall of Famer George Brett, a teammate of Killebrew on the 1975 Kansas City Royals, once said. "If Harmon had hit lefthanded, he would have been Babe Ruth. It wasn't just the number of home runs he hit, but how far they went and how high they went. He hit the highest home runs I had ever seen."

Killebrew was born in Payette, Idaho, near the Oregon border. He claimed to have gotten his strength from hustling 10-gallon cans of milk during the summers as a youth.

His power was obvious the first time a scout from the Washington Senators saw him playing in the Idaho-Oregon Border League. In three games Killebrew got 12 hits in 12 times at bat. The Senators, obviously convinced, made him a \$30,000 "bonus baby," so Killebrew put down the milk cans, packed up and headed for the nation's capital -- where he essentially wasted two years.

Baseball rules at the time stipulated that any player receiving a bonus of \$4,000 or more would have to spend at least two years on the major league roster, a pre-free agency rule intended to keep teams from paying outrageous signing bonuses. Killebrew played in just 47 games over his first two seasons, hitting four homers -- none in his rookie year of 1954. After the two-year period ended, Killebrew, not even 20 years old, yet, was sent down to the minors.

"Mainly, I had to learn patience and the strike zone and concentration," Killebrew said later. "Those were the big things."

He spent parts of the next three seasons in the minors before returning for good in 1959, when at age 22 he led the American League with 42 home runs.

Killebrew could have made upwards of \$20 million a season in today's game. When he led the league in homers in 1959 he was paid \$9,000. Killebrew was among the players who had to moonlight during the offseason for extra cash. As a contestant on the TV show, "Home Run Derby," Killebrew tried to outslug his contemporaries for the extra money as well as the publicity.

He hit 31 homers in 1960, then packed up and made the move with his teammates to the Twin Cities before the 1961 season.

No fan of the cold Killebrew admitted numerous times that he wasn't excited about making the move to Minnesota, a place he figured to be cold and unforgiving. Upon arriving, he realized that his views on the weather were accurate. It was cold, but the people were warm and friendly.

"I loved the fans because they were down-to-earth Midwestern people," Killebrew said. "The people in the Upper Midwest were the same kind of people I grew up around in Idaho."

Killebrew was named the first Twins captain in 1961. He smashed 46 homers that first season in the Twin Cities. His totals the next three seasons: 48, 45 and 49 homers. In 1965 he helped lead the Twins to their first World Series, which ended in a seven-game loss to the Los Angeles Dodgers. He was named to the 1967 American League All-Star team at first base, becoming the first player in All-Star history to be named at three different positions (third base and outfield were the other two).

He was named the American League's most valuable player in 1969, when he drove in a career-high 140 runs and matched his career-best with 49 homers. But by 1971 Killebrew was clearly on the decline, battling knee problems and chronic pain in his big toe. In three seasons from 1972 to 1974 Killebrew produced only 44 home runs.

Griffith offered Killebrew \$40,000 to return in 1975 as a player-coach. He would have pinch hit and tutor the younger hitters. Instead, he signed with the Kansas City Royals to be their designated hitter.

He appeared in 106 games, hit 14 homers and drove in 44 runs while batting .199. Kansas City released Killebrew after the 1975 season, and he decided to retire. In retiring, he left behind a legacy of 400-foot home runs and being one of the game's true gentlemen.

Brett called Killebrew "one of the nicest guys I have ever met in the game."

Former Twin Torii Hunter remembered Killebrew as a mentor, not only on the field but off. Hunter said Killebrew looked at his autograph several years ago and deemed it illegible.

"I had a doctor's signature," Hunter said. "I had a 'T' and an 'I' and a dot-dot. He said, 'What the hell is this?'" Killebrew told Hunter that if kids found that baseball, they would start throwing it around the park because they couldn't read the signature. He gave Hunter advice the former Twin still follows today.

"He said, 'If you play the game this long, make sure people know who you are,'" Hunter said. "Harmon was a tremendous player, but is an even greater man."

Financial problems

After retiring Killebrew went home to Ontario, Ore., where his house sat on a ridge next to the Snake River. From the living room, he could see over the river, into Idaho and his boyhood home of Payette. It seemed like a happy ending to a distinguished career. But life away from baseball wasn't as rosy. He battled serious financial, family and health problems.

He was a victim of fraud in a failed luxury-home development in Rancho Mirage, California. A car-leasing company in Bloomington, Minn., failed. In 1993, he filed for bankruptcy after a car dealership in Ontario, Ore. failed. He owed four banks more than \$900,000. He couldn't make the \$2,500 monthly payments on his Oregon dream home, and the mortgage company foreclosed. He owed the IRS money for personal taxes and for the auto dealership.

By the late 1980's he was living in a rented condominium in Boise, Idaho.

He borrowed \$100,000 from Griffith in the mid-1980s, and more money from Hall of Famers Reggie Jackson and Warren Spahn.

"It's been a living hell. You have a lot of those days when you feel you're at the bottom," Killebrew said in a 1989 interview. "You get to feeling that sometimes you're out on that island by yourself. I don't feel anger, more sometimes frustration, sadness is another, loneliness is another one. . . . Stressful? That's an understatement."

Killebrew eventually admitted that he knew little about the auto dealing business, but always remained upbeat that he would solve his money problems. But other problems awaited.

He separated from his wife, Elaine, in 1989. The couple had five children. In May of 1990, Killebrew complained of pain in his neck and back that turned out to be a collapsed lung. In August, he still didn't feel well and needed surgery to remove a large abscess from behind a lung. Surgeons removed 1 1/2 inch of a rib, which left a four-inch hole in his back. The area became infected, limiting his ability to walk. He dropped 40 pounds and was sent home with odds against surviving.

He was given intense hospice care, and made a miraculous recovery. He remarried and began representing VistaCare, the hospice-care company that nursed him back to health.

"Hospice is such a tremendous thing," he said in a November 1999 interview with Sports Illustrated. "Patients seem to reach an inner peace. Society doesn't like to deal with death, but it is a natural part of living."

Killebrew, in recent years, had held an annual charity golf event in Phoenix, Ariz, and one in the Twin Cities. He continued to make public appearances right up until he was diagnosed with cancer. It was news when he missed the 2010 TwinsFest to have his gallbladder removed.

"What's amazing is that every time I go back [to the Twin Cities], how much people, even the young people, seem to know about me," Killebrew said in a 1999 interview. "It was a wonderful place to play."

With family at his side, Harmon Killebrew passes away in Arizona

Tom Pelissero, 1500ESPN.com

Harmon Killebrew's battle with esophageal cancer has come to an end.

The Minnesota Twins' legendary slugger passed away on Tuesday morning at his Scottsdale, Ariz., home, the team announced. He was 74.

Killebrew announced on Friday he was entering hospice care after his illness "progressed beyond my doctors' expectation of cure." He died peacefully with his wife, Nita, and other family members at his side, the team's statement said.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew," Twins president Dave St. Peter said in a statement.

"Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest. However, more importantly Harmon's legacy will be the class, dignity and humility he demonstrated each and every day as a Hall of Fame-quality husband, father, friend, teammate and man. The Twins extend heartfelt sympathies and prayers to the Killebrew family at this difficult time."

A native of Payette, Idaho, Killebrew signed with the Washington Senators as a "bonus baby" in 1954. He made his big-league debut later that year at age 18, followed the Senators franchise to Minnesota in 1961 and retired after a single season with the Kansas City Royals in 1975 with 573 home runs, which still ranks 11th all-time.

Killebrew made 13 All-Star games, won the American League MVP award in 1969 and was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in his fourth year of eligibility, receiving 83.13% of the vote in 1984. He remained active in his post-retirement years with the Twins' organization, which retired his No. 3 jersey.

"Harmon Killebrew personified Hall of Fame excellence in every aspect of his dynamic life," said Jane Forbes Clark, chairman of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. "He will forever be remembered for his 573 career home runs and as the 1969 American League Most Valuable Player, and as one of the greatest hitters of his era."

"Since joining the Hall of Fame family in 1984, Harmon was a beacon of light among his fellow Hall of Famers, always smiling, always enjoying every moment that life delivered at his doorstep. We have so many fond memories of this wonderful baseball hero, and we will miss him enormously."

Said hall of fame president Jeff Idelson, "Harmon was a Hall of Famer on and off the field. He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity, and warmth, and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was 'Killer,' as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the earth."

Twins' gesture to departed great Killebrew includes photo slipped beneath home plate

AP 5/17/11

MINNEAPOLIS - The Minnesota Twins' tribute to departed slugger Harmon Killebrew includes an old black-and-white photo that will rest beneath home plate at Target Field the rest of the season.

Killebrew died Tuesday at his Arizona home of cancer.

Later Tuesday, six members of the Target Field grounds crew slowly lifted home plate and slipped the plastic-encased photo of Killebrew under it, then replaced it. A team spokeswoman says the picture is believed to have been taken at Met Stadium in the 1960s.

It shows Killebrew winding up for a mighty swing.

The stadium's video board showed a photo of Killebrew with the years of his life, 1936-2011.

1985: Harmon tries to hit one across the Mississippi

Michael Dorsher, 1985 (update 5/17/11)

Harmon Killebrew didn't quite know what he was getting into when he was asked to make a publicity appearance as part of baseball's All-Star Game festivities.

(In 1985, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire journalism professor Michael Dorsher was the bureau chief for United Press International in the Twin Cities. The All-Star Game was played in Minnesota that year, just as it had been 20 years earlier. Dorsher wrote this story about one of the events that took place during the All-Star festivities, involving Harmon Killebrew and legendary Dodgers pitcher Sandy Koufax, who were the game's honorary captains)

When the All-Star Game last came to Minnesota in 1965, Harmon Killebrew slugged a 411-foot two-run home run.

On Monday, the day before the All-Star Game returns to Minneapolis, Killebrew spent part of the morning in a futile attempt to hit a baseball 600 feet across the Mississippi River.

With more than 1,000 fans pressing too closely to let a pitcher serve up meaty fastballs, Killebrew had to toss the balls up and hit them like fungoes.

Looking like a duffer confronted with the world's largest water hazard, he plunked one ball after another into the muddy Mississippi, none of them landing more than halfway across.

"That was kind of a disappointing experience," Killebrew said later.

He had come to Boom Island dressed in a new red, white and blue Twins uniform with his retired No. 3 on the back. He was accompanied by Sandy Koufax, the other All-Star honorary captain and the man who beat the Twins in the seventh game of the 1965 World Series after just two days rest.

"They told us they just wanted to take some pictures of us in front of the Minneapolis skyline," said Killebrew, apparently unaware of the buildup given the event. "We didn't know anything about hitting the ball across the river until we were driving up to the place. Then there were about 3,000 fans and they all wanted autographs. It was a bad deal."

The fans had come to see the player who hit 573 home runs over 22 seasons -- plus three home runs in 11 All-Star games. Killebrew was elected to the Hall of Fame last year. He tied for the lead in the American League in home runs six times during his career

"I've been watching him since I was a kid, but I've never been this close to him," said Barb Guille who had four children in tow. "I remember a grand slam he hit when I was at the game on Memorial Day (1971)."

The woman standing next to her, Vickie Gangness, remembered being at the park June 3, 1967, when Killebrew belted the only home run to reach Metropolitan Stadium's left field upper deck, a shot of 522 feet.

Killebrew, now 48 and a television commentator for Twins games, looks about the same today as he did midway through his career, only his temples are a little more grey. Bald and stubby, he was a guy arm-chair managers and housewives could relate to.

Even in the aftermath of Monday's debacle, Killebrew appreciated that. As he stopped to satisfy autograph seekers after the opening All-Star Game press conference, a reporter asked why he remained so beloved.

"Gee, I don't know," he said. "But it sure is nice."

Then he left to play in a charity golf tournament

Eight best Twins home run seasons: Killebrew, Killebrew and...

Star Tribune, 5/17/11

SEASONS TO REMEMBER

The top 10 single-season home run performances in Twins history:

Rank/Player Year Home runs

1. Harmon Killebrew 1964 49
2. Harmon Killebrew 1969 49
3. Harmon Killebrew 1962 48
4. Harmon Killebrew 1961 46
5. Harmon Killebrew 1963 45
6. Harmon Killebrew 1967 44

7. Harmon Killebrew 1970 41
 8. Harmon Killebrew 1966 39
 9. Bob Allison 1963 35
 10. Gary Gaetti 1986 34
- Kent Hrbek 1987 34
- Justin Morneau 2006 34

Mariners, MLB Radio to honor Harmon Killebrew tonight

La Velle E. Neal III, Star Tribune 5/17/11

Programming note from MLB Radio:

“Tonight at (7 p.m.) on XM 179, before the Minnesota Twins & Seattle Mariners game, SiriusXM will re-broadcast Baseball Confidential: Harmon Killebrew. Recorded at the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2009, hear Killebrew’s reflections on his Hall of Fame life and career. ”

Message from the Seattle Mariners about tonight's game:

“The Mariners want you to be aware that we will be saluting Harmon Killebrew tonight. First, the flag will be at half-staff. Second, there will be a moment of silence just prior to the national anthem. Third, at the end of the first inning, there will be an in-park video tribute to Mr. Killebrew.

“In addition, at the end of the fourth inning, we will introduce Bert Blyleven in the park and congratulate him on his election to Baseball’s Hall of Fame.”

Twins president Dave St.Peter:

“No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew. Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest. However, more importantly Harmon’s legacy will be the class, dignity and humility he demonstrated each and every day as a Hall of Fame-quality husband, father, friend, teammate and man. The Twins extend heartfelt sympathies and prayers to the Killebrew family at this difficult time.”

Jane Forbes Clark, Chairman, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

“Harmon Killebrew personified Hall of Fame excellence in every aspect of his dynamic life. He will forever be remembered for his 573 career home runs and as the 1969 American League Most Valuable Player, and as one of the greatest hitters of his era. Since joining the Hall of Fame family in 1984, Harmon was a beacon of light among his fellow Hall of Famers, always smiling, always enjoying every moment that life delivered at his doorstep. We have so many fond memories of this wonderful baseball hero, and we will miss him enormously.”

Jeff Idelson, Hall of Fame president.

"Harmon was a Hall of Famer on and off the field. He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity, and warmth, and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was 'Killer,' as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the earth."

Quotes about the death of Twins great Harmon Killebrew

Associated Press, 5/17/11

Reaction to Tuesday's death of Minnesota Twins slugger and Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew:

"When I learned the news about Harmon today, I felt like I lost a family member. He has treated me like one of his own. It's hard to put into words what Harmon has meant to me. He first welcomed me into the Twins family as an 18-year-old kid and has continued to influence my life in many ways. He is someone I will never forget and will always treasure the time we spent together. Harmon will be missed but never forgotten." — Twins catcher Joe Mauer.

"When I was a kid, I mean, you loved the name and the player and the excitement he brought when he went to the plate, and how far he could hit the ball. As I got into professional ball, and as I got a chance to meet him — I didn't know him well but in talking to other people — what a nice man he was. He was a real classy man who loved baseball and got back involved in it with the Twins. They loved having Harmon there. It's a moving story about him going into hospice, kind of saying it's my time. He accepted his fate and he did it with such class." — San Francisco Giants manager Bruce Bochy.

"I am truly saddened by the loss of Harmon Killebrew, one of the great human beings I have ever known. All of Baseball has lost a true gentleman who represented the Minnesota Twins with class and grace for decades. Harmon was as tough and feared a competitor on the field as the game has ever seen, while off the field he touched everyone he encountered with his sensitive and humble nature. ...He led his life with modesty and dignity and I will miss him forever." — Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig.

"This is a sad day for all of baseball and even harder for those of us who were fortunate enough to be a friend of Harmon's. Harmon Killebrew was a gem. I can never thank him enough for all I learned from him. He was a consummate professional who treated everyone from the brashest of rookies to the groundskeepers to the ushers in the stadium with the utmost of respect. I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for Harmon Killebrew. He was a Hall of Famer in every sense of the word." — former Twins star Rod Carew.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew. Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest. However, more importantly Harmon's legacy will be the class, dignity and humility he demonstrated each and every day as a Hall of Fame-quality husband, father, friend, teammate and man. The Twins extend heartfelt sympathies and prayers to the Killebrew family at this difficult time." — Dave St. Peter, Twins president.

"Harmon Killebrew personified Hall of Fame excellence in every aspect of his dynamic life. He will forever be remembered for his 573 career home runs and as the 1969 American League Most Valuable Player, and as one of the greatest hitters of his era. Since joining the Hall of Fame family in 1984, Harmon was a beacon of light among his fellow Hall of Famers, always smiling, always enjoying every moment that life delivered at his doorstep. We have so many fond memories of this wonderful baseball hero, and we will miss him enormously." — Jane Forbes Clark, chairman, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

"Harmon was a Hall of Famer on and off the field. He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity, and warmth,

and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was "Killer," as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the earth." — Jeff Idelson, president, Hall of Fame.

"He was a great player, but he was an even greater man." — Minnesota State Rep. Bob Barrett, R-Shafer, recalling how his father once did contracting work at Killebrew's home and "couldn't remember having met a nicer man."

Eyewitness to history: This Harmon Killebrew home run made a sound like no other

John Shipley, Pioneer Press 5/17/11

Editor's note: This story was originally published on June 29, 2006.

George Kight says it was easy to tell how well a ball was hit at the old Metropolitan Stadium. You didn't even have to see it; the crack of the bat said it all. The steel and concrete of the Twins' former home amplified every contact.

So Kight, who was working as the Twins' chief usher on June 3, 1967, instantly knew Harmon Killebrew had hit the sweet spot when Kight looked up from counting the turnstile numbers. Kight always stopped what he was doing when Killebrew was at the plate, but even he didn't guess where this one would wind up.

"The crowd stood at attention, and at first there was a sense of awe," Kight recounted.

The ball eventually landed in the left-field upper deck, where no man had gone before. In fact, the ball bounced off a seat about eight rows back. The seat later was painted bright orange to stand out in the sea of green seats and remained there until the old Met was torn down after the Twins moved to the Metrodome in 1982.

"That was a big surprise, that somebody could hit the ball that far," said Tony Oliva, a slugger himself. "No one had hit one that far before. There were some very big hitters in the American League, but that was unbelievable."

Oliva was in the dugout with the rest of the Twins when Killebrew hit what is still known as the longest home run in Twins history. Though it's difficult to get an official handle on home run distances, the clout would rank, by any measure, among the longest of all time. Not many balls are hit farther than 500 feet, and Killebrew's was measured at 522.

But not at first.

"I measured it at 435 feet," said Tom Mee, longtime Twins public relations man and official scorer. "Bobby Allison called me from the dugout and said, 'How can you measure that at 435 feet?!' I said, 'That's where it landed; that's how we measure them.'"

Not for long. That day, Mee called the physics professor who had created the Twins' home run chart and had him recalculate to take into consideration how far the ball would have traveled if unimpeded. The Twins use the same chart today.

It's remarkable, and comforting, that, despite their conspicuous increase in muscle mass, today's sluggers don't really hit the ball any farther than their predecessors. Killebrew was a big man, as were Mickey Mantle and Reggie Jackson and Dave Kingman, all known for their power. But it's doubtful any of them would have won an arm-wrestling contest with Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa or Barry Bonds.

"Before, if you had power, you could hit the ball," said Oliva, who hit 220 home runs in 15 seasons. "We had five, six guys here on our ballclub who could hit the ball farther than anybody - Killebrew, Allison, (Don) Mincher, Jimmie Hall, myself. And Zoilo (Versalles) hit some long balls, too. We could hit the ball as far as they hit today, or farther. If you have the power, you hit the ball; if you don't have the power, you don't."

Mantle is generally credited with the longest home run of all time, a clout that left Tiger Stadium on Sept. 10, 1960, and landed in a lumberyard across the street. That ball is measured at 634 feet by the Guinness Book of World Records, but few really believe it went that far on the fly. Kingman hit a famously long homer on April 14, 1976, at Wrigley Field. It was estimated at well over 600 feet but later was reported to have hit a house three lots beyond Waveland Avenue, 530 feet from home plate.

As is often the case at Wrigley, Kingman's home run had a strong wind behind it. But so did Killebrew's, Mee said. A 34-mph wind blew toward the bleachers that day, which is why Mee thinks Killebrew's second upper-deck shot may actually have been hit harder.

Yes, Killebrew did it again, the next day.

"I told Bob Casey about the cover we put on the seat to commemorate the home run," Mee said, "and he was telling the fans over the loudspeaker as Killebrew was coming up to bat. No sooner than the last word had left his mouth, he did it again."

This one hit the second-deck facade in left-center. It was more of a line drive, Mee said, and was estimated to have traveled a mere 469 feet. But, Mee noted, there was but a slight breeze blowing that day.

Oliva said it was harder to hit one out at Metropolitan than at the Metrodome. The new parks are smaller, built for power hitters to entertain today's fans. "Back then," Oliva said, "fans liked to see games that were 3-2, 2-1 or 1-0."

The Metrodome home run record is owned by Ben Oglivie, who was with Milwaukee when, on July 27, 1983, he parked one about 12 rows back in the upper deck in right-center. That homer was officially estimated at 481 feet, one foot farther than the longest hit by a Twin at the Dome, Kent Hrbek's homer hit to straight-away right field Sept. 9, 1984.

Those are amazing stats, and yet they don't measure to Killebrew's 522-foot blast. Mee, who was the official scorer in the Twins' victory Wednesday, said that homer would have hit the second deck in the Dome, a feat no one has accomplished and probably never will.

Killebrew hit 44 home runs in 1967 and entered the Hall of Fame with 573. Only one is honored at the Mall of America, where a stadium seat mounted in the mall's amusement park marks the spot where his long homer landed in the upper deck.

"That ball that Killebrew hit," Oliva said, "it was unbelievable someone could hit the ball that far."

Harmon Killebrew: The Hall of Fame induction speech

Pioneer Press 5/17/11

Editor's Note: This is Harmon Killebrew's induction speech for the Baseball Hall of Fame on Aug. 11, 1984. We thank the Hall of Fame for giving us permission to rerun the speech.

Thank you, Commissioner. I don't know, I was used as a cleanup hitter a few times, but this is the toughest cleanup hitting I've ever done. To follow guys like Rick Ferrell and Don Drysdale and Pee Wee Reese, Luis Aparicio. This is a tough job. Commissioner, inductees, honored guests, families, ladies and gentlemen, and friends, and I do mean friends, because if you weren't a friend of baseball, you wouldn't be out there today, and we're very thankful that you could join us. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

I was born and raised in a little town in Idaho called Payette, and when I was 8 years old, my father gave me my first baseball glove. He was a great athlete. He played football for James Milligan University in Illinois, and then he played at West Virginia Wesleyan under the great Greasy Neale, who not only was the great football coach for the Philadelphia Eagles but he also played baseball for the Cincinnati Reds. And it was through my father's insistence and persuasion, I guess, to insist that I participate in sports, not only in baseball, but in football and basketball and a little track, that I became acquainted with this great American pastime.

I grew up in this small town in Idaho, and my father used to like to go to the movies, and I'll never forget that a lot of times on warm summer evenings like this my father would take my brother, Bob, and I to the movies. And then after the movie was over, he would race us home. He'd always win. He was a man that took a great deal of pride in his children. I'll never forget, we used to play a lot of ball out in the front yard, and my mother would say, "You're tearing up the grass and digging holes in the front yard?" And my father would say, "We're not raising grass here, we're raising boys."

(Applause)

Harmon Clayton Killebrew Sr. would be very proud today, and I wish he were here. And somehow I know he is. Believe me, I know he is.

Excuse me. I don't know how these fellows ahead of me kept from being too emotional because, to me, this is an emotional experience. There's another person that I wish to thank today that's still living in that small town in Idaho. She's 89 years old. And that's my mother, Katherine.

(Applause)

She encouraged me with the unique, great attitude about life, and she couldn't be here today, but my awe at her (is) in a very special way, and (I) thank her for - I really thank her for my very being. And I would also like to thank my brothers Gene and Bob and my sister Eula who encouraged me in my early formative years when I was growing up. But there's a certain blonde girl from Idaho that's here today that encouraged me about as much as anyone else, and she's still doing that. She's here today, and I'd like to introduce her, my wife Elaine.

(Applause)

I'm also very proud of my family, and many of them traveled from great distances to be here with their spouses, and I'd also like to introduce them. My son Cam, his wife Monica and their son Todd. Todd's a little sleepy right now, but he's there. They came from Austria to be with us.

(Applause)

My son Ken came from Seattle. Ken, I'm glad you're here.

(Applause)

My daughter Char and her husband Rick came from England.

(Applause)

Cathy and her husband Scott came from Scottsdale to be with us.

(Applause)

And the baby of the family, Erin, will be a sophomore at Brigham Young University this fall.

(Applause)

I'm glad they're here to enjoy this great experience. I've also got so many friends here that came for many, many miles to be with us here on this great occasion. My two business partners, Ralph Harding and Doug Harper, I'm glad that they could make it. They've been great supporters since my retirement from the game of baseball. I started playing baseball at

8 years old. Not organized, of course, because in those days we didn't have the great Little League programs that produce such great baseball players as we have today, but we had what they call Knothole baseball. And then I played five years of American Legion baseball. And, of course, in high school I played some semipro ball before I started to play professionally. And I want to thank those teammates in those years that I played with - at least one of them is here today - because they gave me a great deal of help, too, in those early years.

If you'll permit me, I'd like to tell a story that I've told on many occasions, but I think you'll realize why I'm telling this story. I talk to a lot of major league scouts, like all these gentlemen up here have talked to over their formative years, and I had decided to play baseball and football at the University of Oregon. And we had a United States Senator from my hometown by the name of Herman Welker, and Herman Welker was a great friend of Clark Griffith of baseball, and he used to go out to old Griffith Stadium a lot. And he told Mr. Griffith about a young boy out in Idaho he thought could hit the ball pretty well.

And I think more than anything else, just to keep Senator Welker quiet, Mr. Griffith sent Ossie Bluege out to see me who was the farm director of the Washington club at that particular time, a former great third baseman with Washington. And Mr. Bluege came out to that little town in Idaho. He rented a car in Boise, Idaho, and drove through the rain 60 miles to that little town. And it didn't look like we were going to play the ballgame that day. It had rained very hard. And I'll never forget that I sat in Mr. Bluege's car, and we talked about going to Washington, that the club wanted me to work out with them, and I said, "Well, I really appreciated that, but I was going to play football and baseball at the University of Oregon."

And we talked, and the skies cleared and the townspeople there, knowing that a major league scout was there, hurriedly got the field in order, and we played that ballgame that night. And that night, I happened to hit a ball over the left-field fence - and I'd been going to that ballpark since I was a small boy and never had seen anyone hit a ball over that left-field fence. It was over 408 feet down the left-field line, and no one that I can recall had ever hit one over there in previous years. And when I hit one that night, Mr. Bluege went out the next morning and stepped it off, and he immediately called Mr. Griffith and he said it was 435 feet or so in a beet field, not a potato patch, and he thought that was a pretty good hit for a 17-year-old boy from Idaho. He left a contract in Senator Welker's law office and went back to Washington.

And I talked that over with my older brother. My father had passed away by then, and my mother decided that baseball was what I wanted to do with my life, and so I signed the contract. And it was so, it was through the recommendation of Ossie Bluege, that I am standing here this day. Mr. Bluege is here, and I would like to recognize him.

(Applause)

Thank you, Ossie.

I'll never forget joining the ballclub in Chicago, and I'd never seen a major league ballgame before. And the second day I was there, they put me in as a pinch runner, if you can believe it. I got to first base, and Walter Dropo was playing first, and he was about - looked like he was, at least to me - he looked like he was 9 feet tall. Nellie Fox was at second. I happened to get to second base, though I can't remember how I got there. And before Luis Aparicio, they had another Latin American shortstop with the White Sox, Chico Carrasquel, he was a shortstop.

(Applause)

And I was beginning to wonder what in the world I was doing there with those fellows. Well, I stayed with that ballclub for a couple of years, and then I went to the minor leagues. And then finally one spring, I happened to be playing a little third base. And of course, in those days, Washington had a great third baseman by the name of Eddie Yost, and it took a trade of Eddie Yost to the Tigers to give me an opportunity to at least (have) a chance to play, but that in itself really didn't do it. In the spring of '59, at the insistence of one man, who at that time took over the running of the Washington ballclub, Calvin Griffith, I was inserted in the lineup at third base. Opening day, I hit a home run and, as the commissioner told you, one the last day of the season to tie Colavito for my first home run championship. And Calvin Griffith is here today, and I certainly want to recognize the fact that I appreciate Mr. Griffith insisting that I be put in that lineup. Calvin, thank you very much.

(Applause)

Calvin's been a credit to baseball in the American League, and I, for one, and I know many, many people, are going to miss you when you are no longer in baseball. Thank you. One of my great heroes in baseball was Ted Williams, and I'll never forget - I wish Ted was here today - I'll never forget Ted saying to me, "You know it's a shame that you didn't grow up in California where the weather was great. Maybe you could have been a better hitter." Well, maybe I could have been a better hitter, Ted, if I'd have grown up in California, but I'll tell you one thing, I'm thankful that I grew up in the great state of Idaho and for the great people in the state of Idaho that have supported me over the years. What a wonderful place to be born and raised. Many people from Idaho are here today, and I'm happy to see them here. I was extremely appreciative when the Minnesota organization moved to, or the Griffith organization moved to, Minnesota from Washington, although I was apprehensive about it because I loved to play in Washington. Those were great years playing for the Washington Senators.

(Applause)

But I quickly learned that Minnesota was my kind of place, and the fans there were my kind of people and are my kind of people.

(Applause)

We enjoyed some great years in Minnesota. We had some great ballclubs. At least four former Minnesota Twins that I played with are here today. A couple of them were on the 1965 pennant-winning ballclub that we played against - a couple of these guys that are up here, Koufax and Drysdale. Jim Kaat and Bob Allison are here today, and I want to thank them for being here with me.

(Applause)

I think I'd be remiss if I didn't thank all the teammates that I played with over the years because you certainly can't get here by yourself. And I thank you. I thank all the managers that I played for over my career. From Bucky Harris, who was my first manager, right on down the line to Dressen, Lavagetto, Mele, Ermer, Bill Rigney, Quilici, McKeon, Herzog, they were all great. They helped me tremendously. Although I didn't finish my career at Minnesota - I played my last year at Kansas City - I thank the Kansas City Royals organization, too. They're great. Mr. Kauffman, I thank you for the opportunity of playing with the Royals. I'm especially proud today to be here to take part in the last official act of our great commissioner, Bowie Kuhn.

(Applause)

In my book, an excellent job well done, and I for one will certainly miss him running this ship. A great man, and he's been great for baseball.

(Applause)

Thank you, Bowie. I'm thankful for the ability that my father in heaven gave me to play baseball, or I wouldn't be here today. I'm thankful to be honored in such a special way by a group of individuals that do an outstanding job, the Baseball Writers of America. Thank you for honoring me. I'm thankful to the Baseball Hall of Fame for this opportunity of being here, and it's a special treat to me to go in with this special group that's going into the Hall of Fame this year: Rick Ferrell, Don Drysdale, Pee Wee Reese, Luis Aparicio. I'm delighted. I love baseball, and I consider this baseball's greatest honor. Thank you very much.

Soucheray: From the start, Harmon Killebrew was the rarest of the rare

Jim Soucheray, 1500ESPN.com 5/17/11

Baseball has been shaken by the loss of the rarest of players, the mythical slugger.

Harmon Killebrew learned to play the game in Payette, Idaho, in a small-town park beyond which was a beet field.

It was said that he didn't practice much, that the enormous extended swing was his by birthright.

He was shy and bulky.

One night, when he was 16 years old, in the presence of a scout for the Washington Senators named Ossie Bluege, Killebrew hit a ball 450 feet out into the beet field.

The townsfolk were dumbstruck. The players on both teams were astonished.

Bluege thought he had been blessed.

The old scout had taken the precaution of bringing a contract with him to Idaho. He got Harmon's name on it the next day, after Bluege stepped off that home run himself in the morning dew.

We didn't even have major league baseball when Harmon was slugging them in Payette. But then the Senators moved to Minnesota and Harmon was ours.

Our first and treasured and perhaps only mythical slugger, the rarest of the rare.

Cuddyer: 'He was able to paint a masterpiece'

Michael Cuddyer, FSNorth.com 5/17/11

Over the last week, every Twins fan and baseball fan alike carried a heavy heart as Harmon Killebrew announced he was entering hospice care and ending his battle with esophageal cancer.

This news weighed heavily on my mind as well as the minds of my teammates and the entire front office. Instead of feeling sorry for himself or spending his last days asking, "Why me," he was more worried about how the Twins were doing and how the fans and the state of Minnesota was holding up. This truly speaks volumes about a man who spent his days on this earth making everybody better.

I didn't know Harmon as a baseball player. I never had the privilege of watching him hit 500-foot home runs at the old Met. I never got to see him drive in Tony Oliva from first base on a ball in the gap. What I did have the honor of doing, though, was calling Harmon Killebrew a friend. It was a friendship I will cherish and honor until the day I am no longer here.

The first time I ever met Harmon was at an Old Dominion University baseball clinic in January 2001. He was the keynote speaker and head clinician, and I was a 21-year-old who just finished with my third season in the minor leagues with the Twins. When I introduced myself to him, he immediately treated me like he had known me forever. He was talking about my statistics and my advancement through the minor leagues. But we talked about more than just baseball; he spent that weekend talking to me about his life and career. For a kid who didn't even realize he knew my name, it really made a huge impact on me. That is something Harmon would continue to do over the next few years.

In winter 2005, I was on the annual Twins Winter Caravan at a night stop in Mankato, Minn., I believe, and Harmon made a one-night appearance. He and Rod Carew were special guests every once in a while on the caravan, and it was Harmon's turn to meet up with us. During the night programs, there would be plenty going on.

The night would start with a dinner and then a question-and-answer session between the fans who came out and the players on stage. Harmon, as always, handled every question with professionalism and grace. He really gave us younger guys a great blueprint of how to treat fans and just people in general.

Once the Q&A concluded, an autograph session began. We tried to get everybody in the audience at least one autograph

from each player. That night in Mankato, I believe we had more than 1,100 people to get through. We were about a third of the way through the line when I heard, from the end of the table, Harmon ask someone about an autograph he didn't recognize.

Now, at that time, I didn't have the prettiest of signatures. As a matter of fact, it was downright awful. It was pretty reminiscent of an EKG that you would get from one of your physicals. You could make out the M and the C, but after that, it could have been Miley Cyrus who signed your ball for all you knew. Once Harmon was notified that the signature in question was mine, he told me that if he saw this ink spot go through the line again, he was going to walk away and stop signing. The only person the people would have been mad at if Harmon had stopped signing was me. From that moment on, I have made it a point to sign my autograph so fans can actually read it. Every single autograph I have signed since then, I have heard Harmon in my head saying, "If you are going to take the time to sign your name, you better make sure people can read it."

This was just one of the lessons I learned from Harmon. As a professional athlete today, it is very easy to get caught up in the limelight. It is very easy to generate an ego and think you are bigger than this world and better than 99 percent of the people in it. Some athletes do portray themselves that way. I am very lucky to have met a true superstar.

Harmon is as big as they come. He did everything there was to do on a baseball field. He set records, he won championships and he won the respect of his coaches, teammates and fans. If anyone could be excused to have an ego, it would be Harmon Killebrew.

What separated him, though, was the fact that he didn't. Not only did he not have an ego, he would always change the subject when talking about how good he was. He would always take the time to ask people how they were doing and what they were up to, and he would genuinely listen to their responses. He was and is the epitome of professionalism, generosity and class.

Although this is a very hard time for fans of Harmon Killebrew and his family, it is very easy to celebrate his life. Everyone who has ever come in contact with him has a wonderful stories to share. Everyone who was ever lucky enough to see him play has a wonderful memory about how he made their summer more enjoyable. Every future baseball player who ever came in contact with him has a wonderful lesson that helped them be a better player and, more importantly, a better person.

So, yes, it is very hard seeing someone who means so much move on to his next life, but it is very exciting to see the marks he left on this one. In Harmon Killebrew's case, this world was the canvas he was able to paint a masterpiece on.

Remembering Killebrew: 'He's bigger than life'

Tyler Mason, FSNorth.com 5/17/11

In the time leading up to and after Harmon Killebrew's death, members of the Minnesota Twins family -- and his admirers from around the country -- had a chance to reflect on what he meant to the team and the people around him:

Bert Blyleven, Killebrew's teammate from 1970-74

"He was a great teammate, a great father-like figure. He was just a man that loved life. He respected everybody. That was the biggest thing about Harmon was he had a great, big heart, and he always gave back as much as he could."

Tony Oliva, Killebrew's teammate from 1962-74

"Killebrew, he is Mr. Minnesota. Everybody knows about Harmon Killebrew. They remember him playing as he hit all those home runs. For the people who had the opportunity to meet him in person, they remember him too as a great person, a great human being. I think he was too nice to be a baseball player because I never saw him mad or anything."

Former Twins star Rod Carew

"This is a sad day for all of baseball and even harder for those of us who were fortunate enough to be a friend of Harmon's. Harmon Killebrew was a gem. I can never thank him enough for all I learned from him. He was a consummate professional who treated everyone from the brashest of rookies to the groundskeepers to the ushers in the stadium with the utmost of respect. I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for Harmon Killebrew. He was a Hall of Famer in every sense of the word."

Twins outfielder Michael Cuddyer

"I never knew him as a baseball player. I never knew him on the field. I never watched him play. The only way I do know him is as a mentor, as a genuine person. He was a father figure to pretty much everybody he met. That says a lot."

Twins manager Ron Gardenhire

"You want every player to watch him and see how he handled himself. I think if you talked to him, you came away understanding what he was all about and not about on the baseball field, just as a person. He was genuine. That's what you like your players to see and take a little part of that with them."

Twins catcher Joe Mauer

"You wouldn't know he's a Hall of Famer when he walks into the room. He's just a great guy, and he's somebody I've learned a lot from, how to be a professional and just a great human being."

"When I learned the news about Harmon today, I felt like I lost a family member. He has treated me like one of his own. It's hard to put into words what Harmon has meant to me. He first welcomed me into the Twins family as an 18-year-old kid and has continued to influence my life in many ways. He is someone I will never forget and will always treasure the time we spent together. Harmon will be missed but never forgotten."

Twins first baseman Justin Morneau

"Whenever he came into spring training we had conversations about hitting home runs, and it's funny because a lot of people won't admit they're trying to hit home runs. I asked him, 'You ever go up there trying to hit a home run?' He said, 'Yeah, if we're down runs in the ninth and got a guy on base, yeah I'm trying to hit a home run.' You learn a lot from the guy."

Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig

"I am truly saddened by the loss of Harmon Killebrew, one of the great human beings I have ever known. All of Baseball has lost a true gentleman who represented the Minnesota Twins with class and grace for decades. Harmon was as tough and feared a competitor on the field as the game has ever seen, while off the field he touched everyone he encountered with his sensitive and humble nature. ...He led his life with modesty and dignity and I will miss him forever."

Jane Forbes Clark, chairman, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

"Harmon Killebrew personified Hall of Fame excellence in every aspect of his dynamic life. He will forever be remembered for his 573 career home runs and as the 1969 American League Most Valuable Player, and as one of the greatest hitters of his era. Since joining the Hall of Fame family in 1984, Harmon was a beacon of light among his fellow Hall of Famers, always smiling, always enjoying every moment that life delivered at his doorstep. We have so many fond memories of this wonderful baseball hero, and we will miss him enormously."

Jeff Idelson, president, Hall of Fame

"Harmon was a Hall of Famer on and off the field. He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity, and warmth, and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was "Killer," as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the earth."

Twins president Dave St. Peter

"He's bigger than life, but when you get to know Harmon, there's nobody that's more genuine or more authentic than Harmon Killebrew."

Twins Chief Executive Officer Jim Pohlad

"This is truly a sad day in the history of the Minnesota Twins organization. The Twins will remember Harmon for his many on-field contributions but importantly for the impeccable quality of his character, his great integrity and his compassion for everyone he encountered. The Pohlad family and the Twins organization send our thoughts and prayers to Nita and the rest of the Killebrew family. Harmon will be deeply missed by all."

Minnesota State Rep. Bob Barrett, R-Shafer, recalling how his father once did contracting work at Killebrew's home:
"He was a great player, but he was an even greater man."

Harmon Killebrew: 1936-2011

Tyler Mason, FSNorth.com 5/17/11

MINNEAPOLIS -- Former Twins slugger Harmon Killebrew, whose legacy off the field was as impressive as his accomplishments on it, passed away Tuesday after a battle with esophageal cancer. He was 74.

Born in Payette, Idaho, on June 29, 1936, Killebrew made his major league debut in 1954 with the Washington Senators. He spent his first seven seasons with the Senators before the franchise moved to Minnesota.

When the team began its first season in Minnesota in 1961, Killebrew quickly became the face of the Twins and a fan favorite. He was an All-Star that year, hitting 46 home runs and driving in 122 runs. The next three seasons, he led the league in homers, a feat he accomplished six times in a 22-year career.

Killebrew, known to fans as "Killer," retired in 1975 with 573 career home runs and is currently 11th on the all-time list.

"He was a nasty hitter," said eight-time all-star Tony Oliva, Killebrew's teammate from 1962-74. "To be able to play with him and see him hit so many home runs and win so many games, he came up with big hits for us. That was a memory that you never forget."

"Harmon rightfully so has gone down in history as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game," said Twins president Dave St. Peter, who remembers watching Killebrew at Metropolitan Stadium. "Incredible power. Iconic figure. Fans simply wouldn't leave the ballpark until he had his final at-bat."

Former Twins pitcher and soon-to-be Hall of Famer Bert Blyleven was a rookie in 1970. He said he and the rest of his teammates admired Killebrew even more for the man he was off the field.

"I remember Harmon one time coming out and talking to me because his two boys, Cam and Kenny, were about my age, maybe a little bit younger," Blyleven said. "I pitched nine innings, and the next day I'd go out there and throw batting practice to them. Harmon would come out and say, 'Listen, you have to worry more about pitching in a game than you do to my boys.' He was that father-like figure that really took care of everybody."

Killebrew broke in with the Senators as an 18-year-old. He spent most of his first five seasons in the minors, then hit 42 homers in his first full season in 1959. He was the American League's Most Valuable Player in 1969 after hitting 49 home runs with 140 RBI and 145 walks, all team records that stand to this day.

"I found out early in life that I could hit a baseball farther than most players and that's what I tried to do," Killebrew said.

Killebrew spent his final season with the Twins in 1974 and played his last year in the majors with Kansas City in 1975. He finished his career as an 11-time All-Star and drove in 1,584 career runs. At the time of his retirement, Killebrew ranked fifth all-time in homers.

Killebrew was larger than life on the field, but he may have touched more lives after his playing days were over. In 1998, he and his wife, Nita, began the Harmon Killebrew Foundation. The vision of the foundation, according to its website, was "to make a positive impact in local and national communities, promoting the 'Goodness of Sports.' "

Killebrew made a positive impact on seemingly everyone he came in contact with, from fans to players. Long after retiring from the game, Killebrew remained a staple at the Twins' spring trainings in Fort Myers, Fla. Despite his declining health, Killebrew was able to make it down to Florida one last time this spring to be with the team he loved so much.

"I think it was huge. It seemed like he was enjoying himself and was able to break up the monotony of what he was going through," said Twins outfielder Michael Cuddyer, who grew close to Killebrew over the years. "For us, it made you want to be a better person when he was around, a better hitter in the cage when he was around."

Added Twins manager Ron Gardenhire: "You want every player to watch him and see how he handled himself. I think if you talk to him, you came away understanding what he was all about and not about on the baseball field, just as a person. He was genuine. That's what you like your players to see and take a little part of that with them."

As a player, Killebrew didn't just hit balls over the fence, he turned at-bats into longest-drive contests. He never worried much about his short game, preferring instead to swing for the fences, and wound up with a career .256 average.

"I didn't think much about batting average when I was playing," Killebrew said.

On June 3, 1967, Killebrew belted the longest home run in Met Stadium history, a shot that reached the second deck of the bleachers in the old park, some 500 feet from home plate.

When the Twins opened Target Field in downtown Minneapolis last year, they made sure to honor Killebrew and his Hall of Fame career. A bronze statue greets fans outside the gates. Killebrew's retired No. 3 hangs in left field, alongside the numbers of Oliva, Rod Carew and Kirby Puckett. One of the park's entrance gates is numbered in Killebrew's honor, as well.

"Harmon Killebrew was a gem. I can never thank him enough for all I learned from him," Carew said. "He was a consummate professional who treated everyone from the brashest of rookies to the groundskeepers to the ushers in the stadium with the utmost of respect. I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for Harmon Killebrew. He was a Hall of Famer in every sense of the word."

Killebrew was diagnosed with cancer in late December. On Friday, the Twins released a statement saying that Killebrew was ending his battle with the deadly disease and was entering hospice care in Arizona.

Four days later, the Twins and Major League Baseball lost one of the all-time greats, on and off the field.

The Minnesota House observed a moment of silence at the state capitol Tuesday.

"Killebrew, he is Mr. Minnesota," Oliva said. "Everybody knows about Harmon Killebrew. They remember him playing as he hit all those home runs. For the people who had the opportunity to meet him in person, they remember him, too, as a great person, a great human being."

Said Blyleven: "Harmon was a big fan favorite, and, hopefully, he always will be. Every time we see up there No. 3, everybody thinks of Harmon Killebrew. He's, to me, the greatest."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Killebrew lauded as class act by ex-teammates

Rhett Bollinger, MLB.com 5/17/11

MINNEAPOLIS -- With an illustrious career that spanned 22 seasons, Harmon Killebrew certainly had his fair share of teammates throughout the years.

Yet, it seemed Killebrew, who died on Tuesday at 74 after a battle with esophageal cancer, left a positive impression on just about all of them, judging by comments from his former colleagues after it was announced Friday that he was entering hospice care. Those who played with him described Killebrew as a class act, a gentleman, a great friend, a wonderful teammate and an even better human being.

While Killebrew was a Hall of Famer for his play on the field, including his 573 career home runs, he was also frequently referred to as a Hall of Fame person off of it.

That's why the news was so difficult for those close to Killebrew, who spent nearly his entire career with the Twins organization, including parts of seven seasons with the Washington Senators before the franchise moved to Minnesota in 1961.

"It's very hard and very tough to hear that kind of news," former Twins teammate Tony Oliva said upon learning that Killebrew was entering hospice care. "The only thing we can do is keep him in our prayers. He's been battling very hard. He made it out to Spring Training, and it meant a lot to the players, for him, the community, for me and my family. We spent a lot of time together. We're like family."

Killebrew and Oliva, who played together for 14 seasons, were especially close. They served as ambassadors for the Twins and were members of the team's Hall of Fame. Oliva was scheduled to fly to Arizona to see Killebrew on Saturday and said he was looking forward to seeing his friend again after spending time with him during Spring Training this year in Fort Myers, Fla.

"He's a good guy," Oliva said. "We keep in touch. His family is my family. His wife and my wife are very close. I remember this year when he first got to Spring Training, he called and told my wife, 'Don't forget about my black bean soup.' So we brought him some to the hotel and talked about a lot things."

Hall of Famer Rod Carew also had nothing but positive things to say about Killebrew after playing the first eight years of his career with the noted slugger.

"This is a sad day for all of baseball and even harder for those of us who are fortunate enough to be a friend of Harmon's," he said in a statement, as he was traveling from Hawaii to California. "Harmon Killebrew is a gem. I can never thank him enough for all I learned from him. He is a consummate professional who treats everyone from the brashest of rookies to the groundskeepers to the ushers in the stadium with the utmost of respect. I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for Harmon Killebrew. He is a Hall of Famer in every sense of the word."

Bert Blyleven, who will join Killebrew and Carew in the Hall of Fame this summer, fondly remembered meeting Killebrew for the first time in 1970, when Blyleven was just a rookie in Twins camp and Killebrew was coming off his MVP season from the year before.

"Being a rookie pitcher, Harmon treated me like one of the guys," Blyleven said. "It was really neat. More like a son than a teammate because I was so young. But when I think of Harmon Killebrew, I think of class. Not just a Hall of Fame player but a guy who just loved life and gave so much back."

Blyleven, who also serves as a Twins television broadcaster, added that Killebrew was as big of a star in the Midwest as any player in franchise history, calling him the face of the Twins.

"I think he probably left an impression in this five-state area bigger than any politician or whoever," Blyleven said. "Harmon Killebrew is Harmon Killebrew. How do you put one word on Harmon Killebrew? You can't. He's so many adjectives, but he's just a class act."

Phillies manager Charlie Manuel also used class as an adjective when asked about Killebrew, as he played the first four years of his career with him and compared him to current Twins designated hitter Jim Thome.

"He's really a first-class guy," Manuel told reporters in Atlanta. "He's just a great guy. He's quieter than Thome. They're very similar in who they are. They're genuine guys. They're real. He's a super person. I used to call him 'Fat Man.' He was big and strong. Back then he weighed 230. He was hard. He was really built like a fireplug. He was about 5-11. Big and strong. Real strong legs. He could hit, man. He had a good swing."

Former Twins pitcher Jim Perry recalled his relationship with Killebrew. Perry lived next door to Killebrew and played with him for 10 years, including three trips to the postseason in 1965, '69 and '70.

"I knew Harmon really well and he was a good friend," Perry said by telephone. "He was a really good guy to have on the team because the guys really looked up to him. He handled himself well with the writers and everyone around the league. So it was a big thing. It's nice to be in the Hall of Fame, but it's about the off-the-field stuff, too."

Perry added that Killebrew's impact stretched further than the playing field, as Killebrew had an equally amazing presence in the clubhouse -- not just because of his talent, but because of his personality.

"He wasn't just a great player, he was a great leader," Perry said. "You could depend on him to get a big hit in the game. It was always nice to see him come up to the plate. But he was also a great guy in the dugout and the clubhouse."

Fellow former Twins pitcher Jim Kaat played 15 years with Killebrew, including two seasons in Washington before the move to Minnesota, and talked with Killebrew on Monday. He said Killebrew was the consummate Twins player and one that many have emulated over the years.

"He really is the face of the Twins franchise," Kaat told reporters in New York. "I think he's the main reason the Twins have a reputation for being a gentlemanly organization. I think it all started with him."

Kaat recalled Killebrew's raw power -- he hit more than 40 home runs eight times and led the American League in homers six times.

"There are two guys that could make you stop when they hit these towering home runs," Kaat said. "That was Mickey [Mantle] and Harmon. In the pre-cable TV days, he didn't get that much exposure. He hit them at key times, good pitchers in key moments."

It was a statement echoed by Oliva, who said Killebrew was the premier slugger of his era back when home runs were still relatively rare.

"I've never seen a home run hitter like Killebrew," Oliva said. "When I played, there was no better home run hitter than him. And in those days, a lot of those ballparks were big and the ball was more of a dead ball."

Even those who didn't get a chance to play with Killebrew were in awe of his career and his grace, including Jack Morris, who grew up St. Paul and helped lead the franchise to a World Series title in 1991. Morris now serves as a radio broadcaster for the Twins and remembered watching Killebrew while growing up.

"Harmon is so many things to so many people here in Minnesota, but to me he was my boyhood idol," Morris said. "Everybody wanted to be Harmon Killebrew when they were a little kid. But he was an even a better person once I got to know him."

Execs, Twins players recall Killebrew fondly

Rhett Bollinger, MLB.com 5/17/11

Harmon Killebrew's passing Tuesday brought more support and remembrance from Twins players, coaches and club executives. Even in the sadness of the day, the thoughts focused the life and joy of Killebrew, who was regarded by all as a class act.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew," said Twins president Dave St. Peter, who visited Killebrew in Arizona on Thursday.

"Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest. However, more importantly, Harmon's legacy will be the class, dignity and humility he demonstrated each and every day as a Hall of Fame-quality husband, father, friend, teammate and man. The Twins extend heartfelt sympathies and prayers to the Killebrew family at this difficult time."

Killebrew, 74, was considered one of the faces of the Twins franchise, as he played nearly his entire career with the organization, making his debut with the then-Washington Senators on June 23, 1954, as a 17-year-old from Payette, Idaho. He went on to an illustrious career spanning 22 seasons, hitting 573 home runs while making 11 All-Star appearances.

"This is truly a sad day in the history of the Minnesota Twins organization," Twins chief executive officer Jim Pohlad said. "The Twins will remember Harmon for his many on-field contributions but importantly for the impeccable quality of his character, his great integrity and his compassion for everyone he encountered."

"Harmon Killebrew personified Hall of Fame excellence in every aspect of his dynamic life," Hall of Fame chairman Jane Forbes Clark said. "Since joining the Hall of Fame family in 1984, Harmon was a beacon of light among his fellow Hall of Famers, always smiling, always enjoying every moment that life delivered at his doorstep. We have so many fond memories of this wonderful baseball hero, and we will miss him enormously."

"Harmon was a Hall of Famer on and off the field," Hall of Fame president Jeff Idelson said. "He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity, and warmth, and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was 'Killer,' as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the earth."

"When I learned the news about Harmon today, I felt like I lost a family member," Twins catcher Joe Mauer said. "He has treated me like one of his own. It's hard to put into words what Harmon has meant to me. He first welcomed me into the Twins family as an 18 year old kid and has continued to influence my life in many ways. He is someone I will never forget and will always treasure the time we spent together. Harmon will be missed but never forgotten." Twins players spoke Friday of their reactions and thoughts after it was announced Killebrew was entering hospice care, his battle with esophageal cancer at an end. They all talked about how humble and kind he was, and about the mentorship he provided.

"I think everybody was touched one way or another," manager Ron Gardenhire said. "We know he's been going through a lot and having a big battle with this cancer. It's a sad day, a really sad day to hear the news that Harmon is struggling. He's a good man and it's been a lot of fun having him on the field with us. So it's a hard day I think for everybody."

"The one thing I'd admired about him since the day I met him is how he treats everybody the same," said catcher Joe Mauer, who met him as an 18-year-old at TwinsFest. "You wouldn't know he's a Hall of Famer when he walks into the room. He's a great guy and I've really learned about him. He's a professional and a great human being."

Mauer added that one of the most indelible marks that Killebrew left on him was simply working on his autograph, as Killebrew always had a fan-first attitude and made sure his name was legible when signing for fans.

"He would always get on me about my autograph," Mauer said with a smile. "He signs autographs all the time and probably has the prettiest autograph in the game. So he always says to make sure they can read it. So he's a great guy, and obviously that's just one thing I've learned from him over the years."

Michael Cuddyer had a similar story, as Killebrew took him aside one time and told him to work on his signature.

"I did a signing with him on Caravan one year and my signature looked pretty bad." Cuddyer said. "He told me, 'If I see this come through the line one more time I'm walking away and leaving, and the only person these people are going to

[be] mad at is you because you're the reason I'm going to leave.' From then on I've tried to make it as legible as I can. Every time I sign an autograph, he's in my head, thinking about how it looks."

Killebrew was also a fixture at Spring Training over the years, including in 2006, when he first joined Gardenhire and wore his No. 3 jersey out on the field. Gardenhire recalled that moment fondly, calling it his favorite memory with Killebrew.

"I thought that was really cool that day to see him in my office shaking my hand and telling me he was so excited to be on the field," Gardenhire said. "That was as great of a moment as you can have as a manager, knowing you rubbed elbows with Harmon Killebrew."

While at Spring Training, Killebrew spent time giving pointers to players, but more importantly, he took time to just chat with players to make them feel better and welcome.

"I think more than anything guys are just happy to see him and happy to know him," said Scott Baker, who met Killebrew in 2004 while pitching in Double-A. "He means a lot to this organization and he's fun to be around. He's enjoyable to be around and always has a smile on his face. It didn't matter if you just got called up or if you were 15 years in the big leagues. He treated everybody the same. He's just a great man, and I'm very proud to say I had a chance to know him."

Killebrew even made it to Spring Training this year, even after being diagnosed with esophageal cancer in December. It was special for the players to see Killebrew, especially because they were aware of what he was going through.

"It meant a lot because we knew what he was battling and what was going on with him," center fielder Denard Span said. "For me, I didn't ask him how he was doing, but I wanted to so bad. I didn't want him to think about what was going on. I just wanted him to get his mind off what was going on. So for him to be around us, it lifted him up."

But Killebrew's health took a turn for the worst, and many of the players were noticeably saddened by the news.

"I know everybody in this clubhouse, the Minnesota Twins and all our families have our thoughts and prayers with him and his family," outfielder Jason Kubel said. "So it's tough news for everybody. He was a great guy and he was always happy to see us and we were always thrilled to see him."

The Twins decided to honor Killebrew by hanging up a No. 3 jersey in the dugout and will wear their throwback jerseys at Target Field all year.

"We figured it would be good tribute to pay to him for the rest of the season," Cuddyer said. "I've asked everybody and think everybody has complied that we'll wear these uniforms all season when we're at home."

Killebrew was 'Paul Bunyan with a uniform on'

MLB colleagues remembered the iconic Minnesota Twin for his towering home runs and gracious demeanor.

Neal LaVelle, Star Tribune-5/18/11

When Harmon Killebrew's bulging forearms snapped his bat through the strike zone and made full contact, there was nothing else like it in baseball. His home runs were towering blasts that provided Minnesotans with their introduction to major league baseball.

The iconic Twin, known as much for his humble demeanor as his prodigious home runs, died Tuesday morning at his Scottsdale, Ariz., home at the age of 74 after a nearly five-month battle with esophageal cancer.

Killebrew was the face of the Twins for 14 seasons after the franchise moved to Minnesota from Washington, D.C., before the 1961 season. He is 11th on the all-time major league home run list with 573, of which 475 were hit wearing a Twins uniform. He has the eighth-highest single-season total in Twins history, was a 13-time All Star and the American League MVP in 1969. And he was the Twins' first Hall of Fame inductee in 1984.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization ... than Harmon Killebrew," said Twins President Dave St. Peter, who credited the Hall of Famer with helping "lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise."

Former Twins star Kent Hrbek, born and raised within blocks of the Twins' first home at Metropolitan Stadium, called Killebrew "Paul Bunyan with a uniform on."

Killebrew became so popular that the street in front of Metropolitan Stadium was named after him, and today is still one of the major roads into the Mall of America. His home runs were such a draw that then-owner Calvin Griffith made the slugger the team's first \$100,000 player in 1971.

The flag at Seattle's Safeco Field, site of Tuesday's game against the visiting Twins, flew at half-staff. A moment of silence was observed before the game, and the Twins wore a No. 3 patch on their uniforms, a tribute that will continue throughout this season.

At Target Field, team officials buried a black-and-white photo of Killebrew beneath home plate, and team officials announced preliminary plans for a public memorial service next week, likely on May 26, when the club has an off day.

Killebrew retained strong ties with Minnesota right up to his death, making several appearances in the Twin Cities each year, and since 2006 making an annual trip to the Twins spring training camp.

Killebrew's cancer was diagnosed in the last week of December, and he vowed to do all he could to fight the disease. He made enough progress with chemotherapy and radiation treatments that he was allowed to visit camp in mid-March.

Although noticeably a few pounds lighter, Killebrew moved well and seemed to be his old self. He spoke of attending the home opener on April 8 and returning for his annual charity golf tournament June 29-30, which coincided with his 75th birthday.

Alas, he made neither.

His wife, Nita, and other family members were with him at their home as he died, just four days after he had announced that he was ending his battle with the disease and entering hospice care. Former teammates, including Tony Oliva and Julio Bequer, visited him in Scottsdale over the weekend.

"When you go through something like this, you're not really sure of what to expect," Killebrew said in March. "The thing that's really been an effect on me is how many people have reached out to me. That's one thing I want to say is to thank all of the people who sent cards and letters and e-mails and all of the well-wishes. It's really been overwhelming and special."

Powerful build

Killebrew played in one of the game's golden eras, with the likes of Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Ernie Banks, Mickey Mantle and Frank Robinson. Killebrew's monstrous home runs set him apart even among his future Hall of Fame peers.

He was only about 5-11 but was 220 pounds -- a burly man with strong arms and stronger hands. He shook hands with such force that it would leave the recipient's hand tingling. It was those arms, wrists and hands that gave Killebrew a terrific power stroke. His blasts would sail high into the air and carry and carry until they landed beyond the fence.

"Growing up in Southern California, for some reason my favorite players were Willie Mays, Carl Yazstrzemski and Harmon," Hall of Famer George Brett, a teammate of Killebrew on the 1975 Kansas City Royals, once said. "If Harmon had hit lefthanded, he would have been Babe Ruth. It wasn't just the number of home runs he hit, but how far they went and how high they went. He hit the highest home runs I had ever seen."

Killebrew was born June 29, 1936, in Payette, Idaho. He claimed to have gotten his strength from hustling 10-gallon cans of milk during the summers as a youth.

Killebrew's signing has become a part of baseball lore. In 1954, Clark Griffith, owner of the Washington Senators, supposedly complained during a game to Herman Welker, a U.S. senator from Idaho, about the team's lack of a good-hitting infielder. Welker told him about a 17-year-old from his home state who was set to go to the University of Oregon on a football scholarship.

Griffith dispatched scout Ossie Bluege, who watched Killebrew play three weekend games and go 12-for-12, including a monster 435-foot homer to left. Killebrew shortly after became the Senators' first "bonus baby," signing a \$30,000, three-year contract.

Baseball rules at the time stipulated that any player receiving a bonus of \$4,000 or more would have to spend at least two years on the major league roster. Killebrew played in only 47 games over his first two seasons, hitting four homers -- none in his rookie year of 1954. After the two-year period ended, Killebrew, not even 20 years old yet, was sent down to the minors.

"Mainly, I had to learn patience and the strike zone and concentration," Killebrew said later. "Those were the big things."

He spent parts of the next three seasons in the minors before returning for good in 1959, when at age 22 he led the American League with 42 home runs.

Killebrew could have made upwards of \$20 million a season in today's game. When he led the league in homers in 1959 he was paid \$9,000. Killebrew was among the players who had to moonlight during the offseason for extra cash. As a contestant on the TV show "Home Run Derby," Killebrew tried to outslug his contemporaries for the extra money as well as the publicity.

He hit 31 homers in 1960, then packed up and made the move with his teammates to the Twin Cities before the 1961 season.

No fan of the cold

Killebrew admitted numerous times that he wasn't excited about making the move to Minnesota, a place he figured to be cold and unforgiving. Upon arriving, he realized that his views on the weather were accurate. But he developed a lasting affection for the people.

"I loved the fans because they were down-to-earth Midwestern people," Killebrew said. "The people in the Upper Midwest were the same kind of people I grew up around in Idaho."

Killebrew was named the first Twins captain in 1961. He smashed 46 homers that first season in the Twin Cities. His totals the next three seasons: 48, 45 and 49 homers. In 1965 he helped lead the Twins to their first World Series, which ended in a seven-game loss to the Los Angeles Dodgers. He was named to the 1967 American League All-Star team at first base, becoming the first player in All-Star history to be named at three different positions (third base and outfield were the other two).

He was named the American League's most valuable player in 1969, when he drove in a career-high 140 runs and matched his career-best with 49 homers. But by 1971 Killebrew was clearly on the decline, battling knee problems and chronic pain in his big toe. In three seasons from 1972 to 1974 Killebrew produced only 44 home runs.

Then-Twins owner Calvin Griffith offered Killebrew \$40,000 to return in 1975 as a player-coach. He would have pinch hit and tutored the younger hitters. Instead, he signed with the Kansas City Royals to be their designated hitter.

He appeared in 106 games, hit 14 homers and drove in 44 runs while batting .199. Kansas City released Killebrew after the 1975 season, and he decided to retire.

In retiring, he left behind a legacy of 400-foot home runs and the memory of one of the game's true gentlemen.

Former Twins outfielder Torii Hunter remembered Killebrew as a mentor, both on and off the field. Hunter said Killebrew looked at his autograph several years ago and deemed it to be illegible.

"I had a doctor's signature," said Hunter, now with the Los Angeles Angels. "I had a 'T' and an 'I' and a dot-dot. He said, 'What the hell is this?'" Killebrew told Hunter that if kids found that baseball, they would start throwing it around the park because they couldn't read the signature. He gave Hunter advice the former Twin still follows today.

"He said, 'If you play the game this long, make sure people know who you are,' " Hunter said. "Harmon was a tremendous player, but is an even greater man."

Financial problems

After retiring, Killebrew went home to Ontario, Ore., where his house sat on a ridge next to the Snake River. From the living room, he could see over the river, into Idaho and his boyhood home of Payette. It seemed like a happy ending to a distinguished career.

But life away from baseball wasn't as rosy. He battled serious financial, family and health problems. He was a victim of fraud in a failed luxury-home development in Rancho Mirage, California. A car-leasing company in Bloomington, Minn., failed. In 1993, he filed for bankruptcy after a car dealership in Ontario, Ore., failed. He owed four banks more than \$900,000. He couldn't make the \$2,500 monthly payments on his Oregon dream home, and the mortgage company foreclosed. He owed the IRS money for personal taxes and for the auto dealership.

By the late 1980s he was living in a rented condominium in Boise, Idaho.

He borrowed \$100,000 from Griffith in the mid-1980s, and more money from Hall of Famers Reggie Jackson and Warren Spahn.

"It's been a living hell. You have a lot of those days when you feel you're at the bottom," Killebrew said in a 1989 interview. "You get to feeling that sometimes you're out on that island by yourself. I don't feel anger, more sometimes frustration, sadness is another, loneliness is another one. ... Stressful? That's an understatement."

He separated from his wife, Elaine, in 1989. The couple had five children. In May 1990, Killebrew complained of pain in his neck and back that turned out to be a collapsed lung. In August, he still didn't feel well and needed surgery to remove a large abscess from behind a lung. Surgeons removed 1 1/2 inch of a rib, which left a four-inch hole in his back. The area became infected, limiting his ability to walk. He dropped 40 pounds and was sent home with odds against surviving.

He was given intense hospice care and made a miraculous recovery. He remarried and began representing VistaCare, the hospice-care company that nursed him back to health.

"Hospice is such a tremendous thing," he said in a November 1999 interview with Sports Illustrated. "Patients seem to reach an inner peace. Society doesn't like to deal with death, but it is a natural part of living."

Killebrew, in recent years, had held an annual charity golf event in Phoenix and one in the Twin Cities. He continued to make public appearances right up until his cancer was diagnosed. It was news when he missed the 2010 TwinsFest to have his gallbladder removed.

"What's amazing is that every time I go back [to the Twin Cities], how much people, even the young people, seem to know about me," Killebrew said in a 1999 interview. "It was a wonderful place to play."

Legends send off a hero and a friend

Before Jack Morris, Kent Hrbek and Paul Molitor became major leaguers, they were boys who idolized No. 3. Tony Oliva, Julio Becquer and Frank Quilici shared the field and more.

Judd Zulgad, Star Tribune-5/17/11

Jack Morris was known as a tough and fiery competitor during 18 big-league seasons. But the St. Paul native made no attempt to show a tough facade Tuesday as he reflected on the death of Twins great Harmon Killebrew.

"I lost a hero," Morris said, his voice cracking and tears welling in his eyes.

Morris, 56, was among six former Twins who gathered in the Target Field interview room to talk about Killebrew, who died Tuesday in Arizona at age 74 after a five-month battle with esophageal cancer.

Tony Oliva, Julio Becquer and Frank Quilici were teammates and close friends of Killebrew's. Native Minnesotans Morris, Kent Hrbek and Paul Molitor remembered Killebrew as their boyhood idol before they stepped onto a major league field.

Hrbek grew up in the shadow of Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington and described the Hall of Famer slugger as "Paul Bunyan with a uniform on."

Molitor, who flew to Arizona last weekend to visit Killebrew after it was revealed that he was in his final days, spoke of being thankful for the opportunity to spend time with one of his heroes. "I'm grateful that I could tell him, as a young man growing up in this state, [that I] idolized him and just that I was very appreciative of the man he was and how I was able to learn from him," said Molitor, who also is in the Hall of Fame. "I picked the guy that you would want to pick to be your idol."

Morris, the longtime Detroit Tigers ace who won Game 7 of the 1991 World Series for the Twins, said he believed that Tuesday was more of a celebration of Killebrew's life than it was a mourning of his death.

"I'll always remember the good in Harmon, and like Paul and like Kent, to remember the innocence of being a young kid who just looked up to a guy he didn't know because of what he did as a baseball player, that you hoped that maybe someday you could be like," Morris said. "As a grown man now, I look back at him not as that guy but as the guy that tried to show me you don't have to be angry, you don't have to be mad. You can love and share love."

Oliva and Becquer traveled to the Scottsdale area together last weekend to say their goodbyes. They found Killebrew surrounded by family and in good spirits Saturday before things took a turn for the worse. The three recalled old times.

"Killebrew was laughing, and that was happy for me because I was thinking I would go see him in very bad shape and when I saw him laughing and talking it was a big surprise for me," Oliva said. "That was Saturday, and I was happy for me to have that opportunity to get there and see him in person.

"Sunday was a different story. I came back and was visiting and he was very down. You could see he was hurting. He said, 'You know I love you.' "

Said Becquer: "He was not just a friend. He was like family to me."

Quilici, an infielder with the Twins in 1965 and again from 1967 to 70, also served as the team's manager from 1972 to 1975. This gave him plenty of time around Killebrew, who played for the Twins from 1961 until 1974. While Killebrew is recalled as a gentle giant, Quilici said that didn't mean Killebrew lacked a temper.

"There wasn't a patsy in him, believe me," Quilici said. "If he got angry, he got angry inside himself and you could see when it was because he got quiet. He just was determined, whether he struck out, whether he made an error, maybe something was going wrong as far as the ballclub went. You could see him gritting his teeth. ... Inside of him, he was one of the biggest competitors you ever met in your life."

Said Morris: "The one thing that hits home the most with Harmon is his strength. Not as a player, but as a person. In his strength and his kindness. To me, he was a real man, he was all man, because he loved so much. He is this family that we call the Minnesota Twins."

Slugger put Minnesota on baseball map in 1965

Patrick Reusse, Star Tribune-5/17/11

Calvin Griffith gained permission from the American League to move his Washington Senators to the Bloomington prairie in October 1960. We had a great old time at Met Stadium in those earliest summers, with slugger Harmon Killebrew as the hero among heroes.

The Killer would hit more than 40 home runs in his first four Minnesota seasons, and lead the league with 48, 45 and 49 in 1962-64. He hit those 45 in 1963 despite missing the first 20 games after knee surgery.

And yet it was 1965, a season in which Harmon would miss several weeks after the All-Star break because of a dislocated elbow, when our pride in the Killer and in our major league status reached its zenith.

There would be a World Series, but before that there would be an All-Star Game in Minnesota. The date was July 13, which meant the corn in the fields visible from the Met's second deck would be knee-high and rustling in the summer breeze.

Talk about a reason to celebrate -- the greatest players in the greatest game were going to gather in our favorite erector set.

We were big league.

Officially.

And to make it more fantastic, the '65 Twins, after hints of strength in earlier seasons, sprung from the gate, moved into first place in the 10-team American League on Memorial Day weekend and started opening a gap.

The dreaded Yankees, AL champions in five consecutive seasons and 14 of the previous 16, were at the Met for a four-game series that preceded the All-Star Game. They arrived trailing the Twins by 12 1/2 games, and still we could not believe the Yankees truly were dead.

Not until Sunday -- when Killebrew hit a two-run home run on a 3-2 pitch with two outs in the ninth for a 6-5 victory. Ray Scott's call of that at-bat, and that blast, lives in Twins lore. Harmon's homer gave the Twins three of four in the series, a five-game lead over Cleveland and Baltimore and a 14 1/2-game separation from the Yankees.

The Killer's homer had us ready to burst with excitement, and then two days later, the All-Stars were here, and the burst was with pride.

The National League brought the greatest assembly of talent on one team in baseball history. There were 11 future Hall of Famers, and that doesn't count Pete Rose, the all-time hit king.

Juan Marichal, Sandy Koufax, Bob Gibson and Don Drysdale took care of 19 of the required 27 outs for the National League. Roberto Clemente, Frank Robinson and Billy Williams were the NL's backup outfielders to Willie Mays, Henry Aaron and Willie Stargell.

The NL ripped starter Milt Pappas and then one of our six Twins, Mudcat Grant, for five runs in the first two innings. The 46,706 ticket holders (including me) feared humiliation for our overmatched league on this humid afternoon.

It didn't count in the standings, but Minnesota needed Harmon -- to save face -- as much that afternoon as at any time.

The lead was 5-1 entering the last of the fifth and Cincinnati's Jim Maloney was on to join the future Hall of Famers in throwing bullets. But Detroit's Dick McAuliffe hit a two-run homer, and then Harmon came up with Brooks Robinson on base, and hit a two-runner to make it 5-5.

The Killer circled the bases inside one of the great dins ever heard at a ballgame in Bloomington.

The NLers eventually won 6-5, but Harmon had made the day for us, and he would later say: "That was really a big thrill, hitting it before the hometown fans."

Such a thrill, in fact, that when sculptor Bill Mack contacted Killebrew about the bronze statue that would sit on Target Field's plaza, and asked for a photo, Harmon said he had just the one.

And he sent along the newspaper photo of him getting full extension on the swing that sent the Maloney pitch into the Met's bleachers and tied the 1965 All-Star Game at 5-5. It was that swing, that big, uppercut finish, that Harmon -- early in his 70s -- tried to duplicate during studio sessions with Mack.

Harmon has gone, hopefully to a Field of Dreams, but if you're too young to remember that All-Star home run, don't fret it. You can see the Killer take that swing 365 days a year, in downtown Minneapolis, in bronze.

Killebrew made himself into fabulous power hitter

Former Twins manager Sam Mele said once the slugger stopped overswinging, his blasts amazed players and fans alike.

Sid Hartman, Star Tribune-5/17/11

Nobody had more respect for the late Harmon Killebrew than Sam Mele, who managed the Twins to the 1965 American League pennant and a chance to face the Los Angeles Dodgers in the World Series.

"Everybody looked up to him and if anything happened in the clubhouse, [if] they had a gripe or something, he would stop it before it ever reached my office," said Mele, now 89.

"I played with him at Indianapolis [in 1958]," Mele recalled. "He couldn't hit, he missed balls, he struck out an awful lot. [Killebrew and Jim Lemon] were roommates and [Lemon] helped him an awful lot. [Lemon told him:] 'Don't try to hit every ball out of the ballpark. Just make good, solid contact, let the ball go where it will.' And he did, and he used to hit [homers] to center field, right-center, right field, left field, left-center. He had that kind of power.

"He made himself a good ballplayer, let me tell you. He worked at it."

Batting practice became a great attraction for the Senators and then the Twins, because fans and even opposing players came out early to see Killebrew hit long home runs to all fields, according to Mele.

While Killebrew never had the reputation of being a good fielder at third base, Mele said he had good hands.

"[Former Twins owner] Calvin Griffith called me into the office one day and, contrary to what I wanted to do, suggested that we try Killebrew in the outfield," Mele recalled. "Well, I knew the experiment wouldn't work because Harmon could play a single into a triple because of his lack of speed. After a short try, Mr. Griffith decided the best place for Harmon was in the infield. Then late in his career, Killebrew was moved to first base."

In fact, in 1968, Killebrew made the American League All-Star team at first base, but he tore his left hamstring in the third inning of the game in the Houston Astrodome and missed the rest of the season.

Killebrew, who is 11th among major leaguers with 573 home runs, hit some long ones at Met Stadium. One Mele won't forget was on July 11, 1965, when Killebrew's two-run, ninth-inning home run off Pete Mikkelsen defeated the Yankees 6-5. The homer received a lot of attention from the media who were there that weekend because the All-Star Game was here two days later, and the clout gave the Twins a five-game lead in the American League pennant race.

Mele also recalled Killebrew's mammoth 522-foot home run at Met Stadium off the California Angels' Lew Burdette in 1967. "They marked that home run in left field," recalled Mele of the first homer hit into the Met's upper deck in left. "The same year, they marked a long one Ted Williams hit in Fenway Park."

One interesting story I recall involved Killebrew, Rod Carew and Billy Martin.

Harmon was on his way to the RBI title in 1969. And in this particular game, Killebrew got a hit and instead of scoring, Carew loafed around third base and was thrown out, costing Killebrew an RBI. After the game Martin, in his only year of managing the Twins, walked over to Carew's locker, grabbed Carew and walked him over to Killebrew's locker. "I want you to apologize to Harmon, you might have cost him the RBI title," Martin said.

Yes, no doubt Killebrew was the local fans' first real superhero. Lakers center George Mikan was the first hero of the first major league team in Minnesota. But once Harmon came here with the Twins in 1961, he became the top celebrity at that time.

An era passes with a graceful giant

Call him an Everyman. Call him a gentleman. But Harmon Killebrew lived up to the lofty expectations thrust on stars in baseball's golden age.

Jim Souhan, Star Tribune-5/18/11

Think of the phrases we use to praise modern-day athletes. They possess "killer instinct." They "stick the dagger" into the opponent. They display "swagger" and "athletic arrogance."

When Harmon Killebrew passed away in Arizona on Tuesday, the sporting world may have lost its foremost gentleman. The greatest Twin did not require false machismo to become one of the greatest home-run hitters in baseball history. Harmon Killebrew did require pressure to exhibit grace.

Will we ever encounter his kind again?

Killebrew's era predated steroid scandals and sporting paparazzi. When he played, players often lived in middle-class neighborhoods. Even if a current player possessed Killebrew's Everyman attitude, he would be distanced from much of society by the invisible fencing of wealth and fame.

Naivete and nostalgia are often weaknesses. In remembrance of Killebrew, allow those of us who grew up watching him and his peers a moment of sepia-toned remembrance.

I spent part of my youth living near Baltimore. One of my strongest memories is of a midseason game the Twins played against the Orioles.

Baltimore third baseman Brooks Robinson was my boyhood idol, in part because of his fielding brilliance, in part because he looked so average. Brooksie, with his skinny arms and hangdog face, could have been your middle-age neighbor, had your middle-age neighbor been granted superhuman hand-eye coordination by a higher power.

A line drive would head down the third-base line, and Robinson's hands would move faster than a Times Square con artist's, and suddenly the ball would be bouncing into Boog Powell's outstretched glove for another improbable out, and you got the feeling that as soon as the game ended, Robinson would resume mowing his lawn and shopping for a toupee.

One night, Robinson and the Orioles faced the Twins at old Memorial Stadium. When Robinson left the field with his team, he was replaced at third by a player who looked less likely to become a Hall of Fame ballplayer -- a short, thick, balding player, who looked like a neighborhood butcher playing for the local slow-pitch softball team.

Then Killebrew plodded to the plate, launched a home run deep into the left-field bleachers, dropped his bat, watched the ball fly and started his slow navigation around the bases.

"Oh, he would watch the ball," Tony Oliva said. "He would hit it so far, so high, and he would stand there and watch it.

"Pitchers would throw at him, hit him, for doing that, but I never saw him react. He would just take first base like nothing happened."

I did not grow up in Minnesota following Killebrew, but I know what it is like to have given my young heart to a great ballplayer when baseball was king, when we erected pedestals for our favorite ballplayers and left them there for eternity.

While it may seem inelegant to compare deaths, I believe that it hurts us more when we lose a great baseball player than when we lose other athletes.

Great baseball players, especially in Killebrew's prime, were not occasional visitors to our homes. They were uncles, cousins, friends.

They were there every day in the morning paper. They were on television more often than any other athletes. They were the people you followed late at night, with a transistor radio tucked under your pillow, turned down just far enough that your parents could pretend you were sleeping.

Someday, another player may replace Killebrew as the greatest Twin of all time. It is unlikely that another player will ever become so universally beloved and admired.

We called him "the Killer," but that nickname matched the man only when a fastball was headed toward home plate. In life, he was the most gracious of the all-time greats, the most likely to leave someone he just met feeling privileged to shake his hand.

Jeff Idelson, the president of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, once told me that the two Hall of Famers who most enthusiastically embraced their roles as icons, and most enthusiastically embraced the public, were Robinson ... and Killebrew.

I was lucky enough to see them play the same position in the same game. I was lucky enough to meet both, to confirm Idelson's assessment of the men.

In life, Killebrew did us a great favor. He allowed us to believe that the ballplayers we idolized in our youth were worthy of our affection. He never let us down.

Harmon was trying to help Twins until the end

Despite undergoing cancer treatment, Harmon Killebrew's final visit to spring training was more about teaching the Twins' next generation.

Joe Christensen, Star Tribune-5/18/11

Three months into his battle with esophageal cancer, Harmon Killebrew stood by the batting cage at Hammond Stadium in Fort Myers, Fla., and smiled that Hall of Fame smile.

It was March 20, a quiet day with little fanfare at the Twins spring training complex. Most players had traveled to a road game, but Joe Mauer, Justin Morneau, Jim Thome and Michael Cuddyer were among those taking batting practice.

Killebrew loved each of them like sons.

After the workout, Killebrew found a chair outside the clubhouse and gathered himself for an extended moment. With tired eyes, he placed both hands atop a fungo bat, took a few deep breaths and went inside to remove his baseball uniform for the final time.

Wayne Hattaway, the 71-year-old Twins clubhouse attendant, washed Killebrew's uniform, folded it and tucked it neatly inside a duffel bag next to his cleats and glove.

On Tuesday, Hattaway reflected on that moment after receiving word that Killebrew had died at age 74.

"It was an honor just to hold [Killebrew's uniform]," Hattaway said. "This guy was so nice, I'm surprised the good Lord let him suffer."

If Killebrew was suffering in mid-March, he barely mentioned it on his five-day trip to spring training.

His doctors at the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Ariz., had encouraged him to go, and Killebrew made it a personal goal as he went through chemo and radiation.

In Fort Myers, Killebrew visited Jim Rantz, the team's longtime minor league director.

"First of all, I was surprised he made it down there," Rantz said. "To see him in that uniform -- that was something. He came to my office and said, 'What do you want me to do, Jim?' I was thrilled he wanted to address the players."

About 150 minor leaguers gathered in a meeting room. Killebrew offered a few words of encouragement, told some stories and reminded them to work on their autographs so they were neat and legible.

It was a quick lesson in courtesy from a man with 573 home runs and 573,000 acts of simple kindness.

"You couldn't ask for a nicer feller in baseball, really," Hattaway said. "He's in a Hall of Fame by himself."

In sports, coaches and managers often talk about how lucky they are when their best players are their biggest hustlers because of the example that sets for the rest of the team.

Since 1961, when the Twins first moved from Washington, Killebrew gave them everything he had -- on and off the field. He was a regular on the team's Winter Caravan, signing every autograph in every Midwest outpost, with that pristine signature.

Frank Quilici, Killebrew's former teammate and manager with the Twins, recalled the way Killebrew befriended shortstop Danny Thompson when he was suffering from leukemia in the mid-1970s.

"[Killebrew] was always keeping guys' spirits up," Quilici said. "If you were in a slump, you were liable to get more attention from him."

Jack Morris grew up in St. Paul idolizing Killebrew, then became friends with him during his own playing and broadcasting career.

"I'll always remember the good in Harmon," Morris said. "I'll look back at him ... as the guy who tried to show me that you don't have to be angry, you don't have to be mad. You can love and share love."

Killebrew was among those offering encouragement when Hattaway went through his own battle with cancer a few years ago. On March 20, before leaving the clubhouse, Killebrew gave Hattaway a big hug.

"I said goodbye," Hattaway said. "Told him I'd see him Opening Day."

Killebrew didn't make it to the home opener April 8 as he had hoped. Friday, he announced he was nearing the end of his battle and entering hospice care. On Tuesday morning, he died in his sleep.

Hattaway said he is planning to order one of Killebrew's jerseys to frame at his house in Alabama.

"I'm going to put it someplace special," Hattaway said. "So when I look up, I can see that No. 3."

Fan: 'I've never been so sad about someone I didn't know'

Outside Target Field, fans gathered by the statue of Harmon Killebrew to remember the player they identified as one of their heroes.

Amelia Rayno, Star Tribune-5/18/11

By noon Tuesday, the news had spread: Harmon Killebrew -- Twins slugger, Minnesota ambassador, fan favorite and community inspiration -- had died after a battle with esophageal cancer.

As news media swarmed the area outside Target Field, where the bronzed legend stood forever frozen in his magical home run swing, one man stood quietly in the background, his gray-blue eyes welling up with tears.

At that moment, he was a child again, watching his hero from afar.

"He was kind of the Twins for me," said Kevin Lindquist, a middle-aged man who grew up in Fridley. "It's who you wanted to see."

On this day, he came, in a way, to see him one last time. Even as the memories washed over him, his own reaction seemed to surprise him.

"It kind of makes you feel like your childhood years are gone -- like part of your life is taken away," he said. "I know it sounds stupid ... but I've never been so sad about someone I didn't know."

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Jackie Oie, who claims it would be hard for the Twins to be more ingrained in her life history, likes to say she's in her "51st season."

"I was born in February 1961, just in time for the first year of Twins spring training," she said. Oie grew up with a poster of Killebrew on her wall and remembers gaping at the red seat in the old Met Stadium where the slugger's longest home ball had landed.

Her son was born in 1982, the year the Twins moved to the Metrodome, and baseball always remained the common denominator between mother and son, she said. In '91, when Oie was in a coma from a car accident, her cousin leaned over her bed and said, "Jackie, you've got to wake up -- they're lining up for World Series tickets!"

"The heart monitor just went crazy," she said. "I'm a Twins fan even in a coma."

Tuesday, after a part of her history died, she brought three single red roses and placed them beneath Killebrew's statue with the other flowers, plus the hand-written notes and rosaries.

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It was long ago, and so the memories for John Grabow, a 51-year-old Minnesota native, are fuzzy.

But though he can't remember all the specifics, the aura that followed Killebrew around, he said, was just as important.

"I always had the feeling here that the Twins were never out of a game if Killebrew had an at-bat left," said Grabow, who started coming to games at the Met at age 10, for the Knothole games. "Maybe they were down by two runs ... but if he was going to be up again, you knew they had a shot at it."

Looking back, the constant stories of Killebrew long balls and game-winners -- which dotted the backgrounds of many summers for Grabow -- are even more special.

"His home runs weren't steroid-tainted," he said.

They said it: remembering former Twins great Harmon Killebrew

Pioneer Press-5/18/11

THEY SAID IT

Reaction to Tuesday's death of Baseball Hall of Famer and Twins icon Harmon Killebrew:

- Twins owner Jim Pohlad: "This is truly a sad day in the history of the Minnesota Twins organization. The Twins will remember Harmon for his many on-field contributions but more importantly for the impeccable quality of his character, his great integrity and his compassion for everyone he encountered. The Pohlad family and the Twins organization send our thoughts and prayers to Nita and the rest of the Killebrew family. Harmon will be deeply missed by all."
- Baseball Hall of Fame president Jeff Idelson: "Harmon was a hall of famer on and off the field. He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity and warmth, and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was 'Killer,' as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the Earth."
- Twins TV analyst and former pitcher Bert Blyleven, who will be inducted into the Hall of Fame this year: "We all loved Harmon so much. Harmon was a great man, on and off the field. He was a bigger hall of famer off the field. Everyone that Harmon ever came in contact with has a story about what a class man he was."
- Baseball Hall of Famer George Brett: "He was just a fierce competitor and a perfect gentleman at the same time. You don't see that a lot. Sometimes you get fierce competitors who are bad people. You see guys that are not fierce competitors but nice guys. You don't see the two of them together very much."
- Baseball Hall of Famer and former Twins teammate Rod Carew: "This is a sad day for all of baseball and even harder for those of us who were fortunate enough to be a friend of Harmon's. Harmon Killebrew was a gem. I can never thank him enough for all I learned from him. He was a consummate professional who treated everyone from the brashest of rookies to the groundskeepers to the ushers in the stadium with the utmost of respect. I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for Harmon Killebrew. He was a hall of famer in every sense of the word."
- Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton: Harmon Killebrew was a hero to all Minnesota Twins fans. He always comported himself with dignity. He was a great baseball player and a civic-minded man who lived an exemplary life. He will be missed."
- Former Twin Kent Hrbek: "He was, to me, Paul Bunyan with a uniform on. It's a sad day. We lost an icon. We lost Paul Bunyan."
- Baseball Hall of Famer Paul Molitor: "If you're mindful of Harmon, life will be enriched."
- Former Twins pitcher Jack Morris: "One thing that hits home with Harmon was his strength, not as a player, but as a man. We're all going to miss him. We're all going to love him forever."
- Twins catcher and St. Paul native Joe Mauer: "When I learned the news about Harmon today, I felt like I lost a family member. He has treated me like one of his own. It's hard to put into words what Harmon has meant to me. He first welcomed me into the Twins family as an 18-year-old kid and has continued to influence my life in many ways. He is someone I will never forget, and I will always treasure the time we spent together. Harmon will be missed but never forgotten."
- San Francisco Giants manager Bruce Bochy: "When I was a kid, I mean, you loved the name and the player and the excitement he brought when he went to the plate and how far he could hit the ball. As I got into professional ball, and as I

got a chance to meet him - I didn't know him well, but in talking to other people - what a nice man he was. He was a real classy man who loved baseball and got back involved in it with the Twins. They loved having Harmon there. It's a moving story about him going into hospice, kind of saying it's my time. He accepted his fate and he did it with such class."

- Commissioner Bud Selig: "I am truly saddened by the loss of Harmon Killebrew, one of the great human beings I have ever known. All of baseball has lost a true gentleman who represented the Minnesota Twins with class and grace for decades. Harmon was as tough and feared a competitor on the field as the game has ever seen, while off the field he touched everyone he encountered with his sensitive and humble nature....He led his life with modesty and dignity, and I will miss him."

- State Rep. Bob Barrett, R-Shafer, recalling how his father did contracting work at Killebrew's home and "couldn't remember having met a nicer man" than the Twins' slugger: "He was a great player, but he was an even greater man."

Harmon Killebrew was the greatest Twin

Charley Walters, Pioneer Press-5/17/11

A little more than five years ago, the Minnesota Twins held a public memorial service for Kirby Puckett at the Metrodome. Thousands attended, including Harmon Killebrew, who watched quietly from a press box.

On the baseball field below, over the public-address system, Puckett was proclaimed the greatest player in Twins history. I couldn't help but notice Harmon's reaction. He smiled and continued watching the ceremony.

I played with Harmon for a short while in 1969, the season under manager Billy Martin, when at age 33 Harmon won the American League's Most Valuable Player award after hitting 49 home runs and driving in 140.

For sure, Puckett was a great player, as great as any Twin. But he wasn't greater than Killebrew. So I walked over to Harmon and whispered that not everyone in the stadium considered Kirby the greatest player in Twins history. Maybe it was a generational thing.

Killebrew, a proud but humble man, smiled again. I think he appreciated that.

"Thank you," he whispered back, and continued his focus on the Puckett ceremony.

A few weeks ago, fellow hall of fame former Twin Bert Blyleven was honored at Interlachen Country Club as recipient of the Bobby Jones Award, emblematic of exceptional sportsmanship. Blyleven mentioned that during his 22 seasons in the major leagues, the two nicest people he met were Killebrew and Willie Stargell, the late Pittsburgh Pirates hall of famer.

The first time I got to see Killebrew up close was in spring training in 1969. Killebrew had finished batting practice and was running in right field at Tinker Field in Orlando, Fla. I was in the outfield with Charlie Manuel, the former Twin who today is manager of the Philadelphia Phillies.

Manuel was a rookie, too. As Killebrew ran past us, Manuel gazed at him and said, "Look at those shoulders. He's bigger than I thought he was."

Me, too. Harmon wasn't tall (5 feet 11), but he was robust in those days. He reminded me of a rhinoceros. He had huge forearms and wrists.

In recent years, after several health problems, Harmon shrunk physically, and it was hard to imagine that he was the same guy who hit 573 career home runs.

Killebrew also took time to introduce himself to rookies. He sought them out to welcome them. That made you feel special. Besides being a wonderful player, he truly was a wonderful guy and gentleman.

Killebrew had incredible strength. One day early in the 1969 season after a team workout at Metropolitan Stadium, Twins player Ted Uhlaender physically accosted a team official, pushing him into a locker. Uhlaender, who was high in energy and in superb condition, had become enraged because he had been asked to make a community appearance on an off day.

Harmon raced across the clubhouse, put Uhlaender in a bear hug and yanked him off the guy as if the guy were an ant. That was a sight to behold.

Being in the same clubhouse with Killebrew as a teammate was, for me, nearly unbelievable. I used to walk by his locker for no other reason than just to be near him. His greatness was magnetic.

Harmon clearly was the unofficial captain of the Twins, and I remember seeing the manager, Martin, consulting regularly and privately with him in the clubhouse, I'm sure, to get the pulse of the team.

During four major league spring training camps - one with the Twins and three with the Washington Senators and Texas Rangers - I threw lots of batting practice. Even though we always had a protective screen in front of the mound, there were three hitters who pounded the ball so hard you simply couldn't be confident that the screen would protect you against a line drive.

Those players were Killebrew, and Frank Howard and Mike Epstein of the Senators. But the most powerful swinger was Harmon. I always felt that if Killebrew hit a line drive back up the middle, the ball would blast right through the screen. It was terrifying to pitch to him, even in batting practice. You threw and ducked.

Not much seemed to bother Harmon. He loved to smile and laugh at a good story. But he despised baseball's steroid users. He was reluctant to talk about them much for the record, but privately, it was the only time I witnessed anything that seriously upset him.

One of Killebrew's pet peeves, though, was today's players and autographs. Harmon's signature was a work of art. He took great pride in signing legibly. Most players don't.

I was standing behind the batting cage with Killebrew one day during batting practice at the Metrodome. Twins all-star catcher Joe Mauer was hitting line drives.

"Your swing is perfect, Joe," Killebrew said. "Now work on that autograph."

Killebrew held two hospice fundraising golf tournaments every year - one in the Twin Cities, the other in Scottsdale, Ariz. If you played in them - and who would dare not accept an invitation from Harmon - you always received a personal, handwritten thank-you note soon after the event. During the tournaments, Killebrew made sure to meet and greet each participant, eagerly offering his signature if asked.

At the Twins' 50th anniversary Legends Game last September on a gorgeous afternoon at Target Field, Killebrew, age 74, in the dugout, told me he would have liked to have an at-bat. That would have absolutely thrilled the crowd. But he had been too busy shaking hands and chatting with former teammates and players to fit into the lineup.

A couple of years ago, during a pregame dinner at the Metrodome, Killebrew told a touching story. He had been on the telephone that day with a close friend who was dying.

Their conversation was interrupted because his friend was literally taking his final few breaths while on the phone, and he apologized to Harmon.

"I've got to go now," Killebrew said his friend told him. "Harm, I'll see you on the other side."

My guess is that Harmon probably felt the same way today.

It just got harder to find an old-fashioned sports hero

Tom Powers, Pioneer Press-5/18/11

Harmon Killebrew stood next to the Minnesota Twins' batting cage in Fort Myers on a warm, crystal clear Florida afternoon.

"Gosh," he said. "Herb Score threw harder than any pitcher I ever faced. And I faced Sandy Koufax, too."

Killebrew enjoyed talking about the golden age of baseball. Not so much about his accomplishments, but about his contemporaries, which included everyone from Ted Williams to Whitey Ford. When those memories became so vivid, when he could visualize himself young and strong and swinging a bat in front of thousands of bespectacled, crew-cut fans, many of whom were sporting their best thin ties, he'd just shake his head.

"Gosh," he'd say.

Perfect.

In the days of trash talk, flash poses and general strutting by so many professional athletes, Harmon Killebrew remained an old-fashioned, head-down, toe-in-the-dirt hero. Few athletes have been blessed with such extraordinary amounts of both ability and class.

I'd tell you that Killebrew was my friend, but that would be self-aggrandizement. Killebrew was everyone's friend. Minnesota is filled with people whose chance meetings with the Killer left them convinced they had made a permanent connection with a kindred spirit.

To me, he never looked quite right standing there in living color, be it next to a batting cage or in the clubhouse. Harmon Killebrew became known to all of us by way of a small, black-and-white TV screen. Sometimes the picture on that screen would flutter up and down or roll on a diagonal until someone got up and twisted a small knob attached to the console. But after that slight adjustment, Harmon again would look larger than life.

In his book "Ball Four," former big-league pitcher Jim Bouton noted that one of his teammates, Fritz Peterson, nicknamed Killebrew "the fat kid" because he reminded him of that one overweight boy on every Little League team. But after his playing days had ended, nothing could have been further from the truth. In fact, Harmon was rather short in stature and very trim. It was difficult to envision him as the powerful, feared home run hitter he once had been.

Though he left behind some of that heft once he retired, he brought with him so many of the good things from his years in baseball. Harmon came from an era when boxscores were the primary source of baseball information. He came from a time when salaries were negotiated in private. He came from a time when every ballplayer considered it his duty to at least try to be a role model.

In other words, it was a simpler time. Some would argue that it was better. He once said to me:

"We need to get the kids talking about stats again instead of how much money guys are making. That's the worst part of the whole thing."

In 22 big-league seasons, Killebrew never was ejected from a ballgame. He never was fined by a manager. Instead, he was a gentle soul with a murderous bat.

On this particularly gorgeous day in spring training, he recalled a game at Metropolitan Stadium.

"I remember Camilo Pascual was going for his 20th win on the last day of the season and it was snowing!" he said, laughing so hard that a couple of current Twins turned around and smiled. "I knocked in the winning run, so I remember."

For a baseball lover with an interest in the game's glorious past, Killebrew was a treasure trove of information. Imagine playing during the time of Jackie Robinson, Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris. Not just playing but also excelling. He was a

wonderful liaison between baseball past and baseball present. And he wore that mantle with grace and dignity. Killebrew was not one to denigrate the modern ballplayer, although there were times he wished some would be a bit less self-centered.

In 2004, Paul Molitor was inducted into the Hall of Fame. Molitor grew up in St. Paul idolizing the Killer. On the day of Molitor's induction, the Hall also honored Killebrew on the 20th anniversary of his induction. So Killebrew walked to the microphone on stage to say a few words. In front of him, baseball fans sprawled on the sun-splashed Cooperstown grass. Behind him, fellow hall of famers sat shoulder to shoulder in several rows of bleachers under a canopy.

Killebrew looked around, took it all in and then shook his head.

"Gosh!" he said.

Twins' nod to Killebrew: Photo under home plate

Pioneer Press-5/17/11

MINNEAPOLIS—The Minnesota Twins' tribute to departed slugger Harmon Killebrew includes an old black-and-white photo that will rest beneath home plate at Target Field the rest of the season.

Killebrew died Tuesday at his Arizona home of cancer.

Later Tuesday, six members of the Target Field grounds crew slowly lifted home plate and slipped the plastic-encased photo of Killebrew under it, then replaced it. A team spokeswoman says the picture is believed to have been taken at Met Stadium in the 1960s.

It shows Killebrew winding up for a mighty swing.

The stadium's video board showed a photo of Killebrew with the years of his life, 1936-2011.

Eyewitness to history: This Harmon Killebrew home run made a sound like no other

John Shipley, Pioneer Press-5/18/11

Editor's note: This story was originally published on June 29, 2006.

George Kight says it was easy to tell how well a ball was hit at the old Metropolitan Stadium. You didn't even have to see it; the crack of the bat said it all. The steel and concrete of the Twins' former home amplified every contact.

So Kight, who was working as the Twins' chief usher on June 3, 1967, instantly knew Harmon Killebrew had hit the sweet spot when Kight looked up from counting the turnstile numbers. Kight always stopped what he was doing when Killebrew was at the plate, but even he didn't guess where this one would wind up.

"The crowd stood at attention, and at first there was a sense of awe," Kight recounted.

The ball eventually landed in the left-field upper deck, where no man had gone before. In fact, the ball bounced off a seat about eight rows back. The seat later was painted bright orange to stand out in the sea of green seats and remained there until the old Met was torn down after the Twins moved to the Metrodome in 1982.

"That was a big surprise, that somebody could hit the ball that far," said Tony Oliva, a slugger himself. "No one had hit one that far before. There were some very big hitters in the American League, but that was unbelievable."

Oliva was in the dugout with the rest of the Twins when Killebrew hit what is still known as the longest home run in Twins history. Though it's difficult to get an official handle on home run distances, the clout would rank, by any measure, among the longest of all time. Not many balls are hit farther than 500 feet, and Killebrew's was measured at 522.

But not at first.

"I measured it at 435 feet," said Tom Mee, longtime Twins public relations man and official scorer. "Bobby Allison called me from the dugout and said, 'How can you measure that at 435 feet?!' I said, 'That's where it landed; that's how we measure them.'"

Not for long. That day, Mee called the physics professor who had created the Twins' home run chart and had him recalculate to take into consideration how far the ball would have traveled if unimpeded. The Twins use the same chart today.

It's remarkable, and comforting, that, despite their conspicuous increase in muscle mass, today's sluggers don't really hit the ball any farther than their predecessors. Killebrew was a big man, as were Mickey Mantle and Reggie Jackson and Dave Kingman, all known for their power. But it's doubtful any of them would have won an arm-wrestling contest with Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa or Barry Bonds.

"Before, if you had power, you could hit the ball," said Oliva, who hit 220 home runs in 15 seasons. "We had five, six guys here on our ballclub who could hit the ball farther than anybody - Killebrew, Allison, (Don) Mincher, Jimmie Hall, myself. And Zoilo (Versalles) hit some long balls, too. We could hit the ball as far as they hit today, or farther. If you have the power, you hit the ball; if you don't have the power, you don't."

Mantle is generally credited with the longest home run of all time, a clout that left Tiger Stadium on Sept. 10, 1960, and landed in a lumberyard across the street. That ball is measured at 634 feet by the Guinness Book of World Records, but few really believe it went that far on the fly. Kingman hit a famously long homer on April 14, 1976, at Wrigley Field. It was estimated at well over 600 feet but later was reported to have hit a house three lots beyond Waveland Avenue, 530 feet from home plate.

As is often the case at Wrigley, Kingman's home run had a strong wind behind it. But so did Killebrew's, Mee said. A 34-mph wind blew toward the bleachers that day, which is why Mee thinks Killebrew's second upper-deck shot may actually have been hit harder.

Yes, Killebrew did it again, the next day.

"I told Bob Casey about the cover we put on the seat to commemorate the home run," Mee said, "and he was telling the fans over the loudspeaker as Killebrew was coming up to bat. No sooner than the last word had left his mouth, he did it again."

This one hit the second-deck facade in left-center. It was more of a line drive, Mee said, and was estimated to have traveled a mere 469 feet. But, Mee noted, there was but a slight breeze blowing that day.

Oliva said it was harder to hit one out at Metropolitan than at the Metrodome. The new parks are smaller, built for power hitters to entertain today's fans. "Back then," Oliva said, "fans liked to see games that were 3-2, 2-1 or 1-0."

The Metrodome home run record is owned by Ben Oglivie, who was with Milwaukee when, on July 27, 1983, he parked one about 12 rows back in the upper deck in right-center. That homer was officially estimated at 481 feet, one foot farther than the longest hit by a Twin at the Dome, Kent Hrbek's homer hit to straight-away right field Sept. 9, 1984.

Those are amazing stats, and yet they don't measure to Killebrew's 522-foot blast. Mee, who was the official scorer in the Twins' victory Wednesday, said that homer would have hit the second deck in the Dome, a feat no one has accomplished and probably never will.

Killebrew hit 44 home runs in 1967 and entered the Hall of Fame with 573. Only one is honored at the Mall of America, where a stadium seat mounted in the mall's amusement park marks the spot where his long homer landed in the upper deck.

"That ball that Killebrew hit," Oliva said, "it was unbelievable someone could hit the ball that far."

From 2006: Harmon Killebrew talks, Bob Sansevere listens: 'Baseball was my first love'

Bob Sansevere, Pioneer Press-5/18/11

Editor's note: This story originally was published on Dec. 26, 2006, in the Pioneer Press.

I met a guy who has hit more home runs than anybody in baseball. Sadaharu Oh. He had 868 home runs. I asked him his philosophy in hitting. He said eat, drink, shreep - he said shreep - and practice. He took a bat home after every game, whether he went 0 for 4 or 4 for 4, and swung it a thousand times. I was pretty dedicated, but I doubt I would do that after going 4 for 4. I told Ted Williams that. I thought he was the most dedicated player I ever saw, and he did not make any comment at all.

I'm 70. If I could change anything about my life, I'd make me younger. You know what Stan Musial said, "Old age is not for sissies."

If I had a time machine, I think I'd try to go back to where I was the best in my life physically. Don't ask me when that is, I would guess sometime in the 1960s, so I could play again.

Like all kids in my era, I read comic books - Captain Marvel and Batman and that sort of thing.

Superman was my favorite superhero.

I played all sports in high school: Football, basketball, baseball and some track. Track wasn't as big in those days. I used to be fast when I was young. Then I got older and had leg complications. I slowed down a lot. I wasn't bad in basketball. I was a forward. In football, I was a quarterback.

I was a high school All-America quarterback and accepted a scholarship to play at the University of Oregon. My brother graduated from Oregon's journalism school. The school had great football and baseball programs. Then I ended up signing with the old Washington Senators instead.

If I didn't play baseball, I was going to study physical therapy. That or go into business. Like a lot of guys, I probably would have gone into coaching.

My parents had the biggest influence in my life. I had great parents. My father was a great athlete. He played football and ran track at Millikin University, and he later played at West Virginia Wesleyan for Greasy Neale, who became the Philadelphia Eagles' coach.

As a kid, I wanted to grow up and be an athlete. Baseball was my first love. I started playing baseball when I was 8 years old. I always loved the game. I still do.

I can't think of anything I did really bad as a kid. Not that I was perfect, by any means. I got in trouble once with my brother. He took me out of the neighborhood, and we were in a ditch doing something we shouldn't have done. It wasn't really my fault.

When you have children, that's got to be some of your proudest days. And to see them grow into adults, those were some of my proudest days.

Nita is my second wife. We've been married 16 years. How'd I know she was the one? I just fell in love with her.

Do I wish I could play baseball today? People have asked me that question. If you're talking about the money, that would be nice. But I can honestly say I'm very glad I played baseball when I did. I think the '50s, '60s and '70s were the golden years of baseball. More great players played during that period than any other. You had Willie Mays, Mickey Mantle, Hank Aaron, Ted Williams, Sandy Koufax, Whitey Ford.

What's the best day of my life? I try to make every day the best day.

A lot of things make me laugh. My grandkids make me laugh a lot. They range from 1 year old to 26 years old. They're really something. They come up with good material.

I wasn't grumpy after a loss. That's one of the things I learned early on. You shouldn't get too high when you win, and you shouldn't get too low when you lose. You should try to keep the peaks and valleys not too high and not too low. I've tried to pass that along to a lot of players. Some listen. Some don't.

Not a whole lot makes me angry. I don't easily get angered.

Early on, I got some good instruction from my father and probably got some good genes from him, too.

There's something inside a player that makes them either try to excel, or they don't. Why do some players get to a certain point and don't improve? Desire is the thing. I had the desire to excel.

Baseball is like any other walk of life. It has its ups and downs. It may look rosy on the outside. Baseball is like everyday life. It has its good days and its bad days.

When I started playing baseball, I didn't think about being known as a great player. I never thought about that sort of thing. I was so young and so naive. I was just so happy to be there and have a chance to play.

What do I want the people of Minnesota to know about me? Sometimes, I think they know more about me than I know about myself.

I'm still working for the Minnesota Twins. I do special events for the Twins. One of those special events is a golf tournament we started. We get a chance to help a lot of people this year and next year. We're building "miracle" fields for kids that have physical handicaps. We get an opportunity to really do something that's worthwhile. Incidentally, anybody that wants to help with that project can call the Twins.

I like to play golf. I used to hunt and fish a lot over the years. As I've gotten older, it has gotten more difficult to walk the hills at home, so I stopped hunting. I still like to fish. It's something I've got to get back to doing.

I'd want my friends to say that I was helpful. I'd hate to have them say, "He didn't want to help me when I needed help." A lot of people helped me along the way, and I was very thankful of that. My mother told me when I was a young kid that the No. 1 reason we're here on Earth is to help people. She's right. What else is there?

Material things don't mean that much to me. When I played, we didn't keep a whole lot of things. We never thought about that. A lot of things have gotten away from me. That's OK. They were just things.

I like Clint Eastwood movies. He's one of my favorite actors.

My favorite book is a hitting book by Ted Williams: "The Science of Hitting." Every young boy should read that if he's interested in becoming a better hitter.

I cook old family recipes I got from my mother. My best dish is a mixture of rice and tomatoes and peppers and onions and ground beef. It's really good. I like it, anyway.

I like most every music. I'm not big on rap.

I sing to myself. I like to sing. It's one thing I wish I could do: be a piano player and a singer. If Simon Cowell heard me sing, he'd say, "That's enough. See you later."

I like some of the "CSI" shows that are on now. And I like the "Seinfeld" series. That was good.

The best advice I ever got came from my father. He said, "Don't let people try to get you to lose your composure. Keep a cool head. If they get the best of you, they can beat you at anything." I thought it was good advice. It worked a lot for me in sports and life, too.

The worst advice? There was this guy that told me to sell a certain stock. I shouldn't have listened to that advice. It would have been unbelievable if I kept it. I made a lot of money on it, but I could have made a lot more.

If I could trade places for a day with anyone? I don't think I'd trade with anybody, except a younger me. I'd like to shave 40 years off.

I want my epitaph to say, "Here lies Harmon Killebrew, who was a good friend and tried to help others."

Twins legend, Hall of Famer Killebrew dies

Mild-mannered long-distance slugger beloved in Minnesota

Marty Noble, MLB.com-5/18/11

A man who wielded significant power in Washington, D.C., in the 1950s and is generally recognized as the first player to admire the parabolic trajectories of self-launched baseballs has died. Harmon Killebrew, slugger supreme, Hall of Famer and civic treasure in the Twin Cities, has joined the great majority, among whom he will stand with distinction because of achievement, friendly persuasion, unusual name and "Killer" nickname.

Killebrew succumbed to esophageal cancer Tuesday in Scottsdale, Ariz., at age 74. Diagnosis of the rare disease was made public in late December and he underwent treatment in Arizona, his adopted home state. But he began hospice care on Friday, issuing a statement that said, in part, "I have exhausted all options with respect to controlling this awful disease. My illness has progressed beyond my doctors' expectation of cure."

He is the fifth Hall of Famer to pass in slightly more than a year. The passing of Robin Roberts last May has been followed by the deaths of Sparky Anderson, Bob Feller, Duke Snider and now the slugger who, until 2009, had more home runs, 573, than any right-handed hitter in American League history.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew," Twins president Dave St. Peter said. "Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest."

A native of Idaho, Killebrew made his name in baseball in the nation's capital near the end of the '50s, underscored it many times in 14 summers playing for the Twins in Minnesota, wrapped up his career with one final season in Kansas City, and eventually found a permanent baseball address in Cooperstown, N.Y., among the most prominent names in the game's long history.

"I am truly saddened by the loss of Harmon Killebrew, one of the great human beings I have ever known," Commissioner Bud Selig said. "All of baseball has lost a true gentleman who represented the Minnesota Twins with class and grace for decades. Harmon was as tough and feared a competitor on the field as the game has ever seen, while off the field he touched everyone he encountered with his sensitive and humble nature. He was not only a Hall of Fame player, but a Hall of Fame person."

Harmon Clayton Killebrew was a name of distinction, to be sure. The Major Leagues has had no other player with Harmon as a first name and no other with the same surname.

Though he and fellow Hall of Famer Gaylord Perry played in different leagues until the slugger's career was winding down, Perry once referred to Killebrew as "Ma Bell" because he hit for long distance. Killer, Mickey Mantle, Willie McCovey and Frank Howard were the primary practitioners of the mammoth home run in the 1960s, when Killebrew won five of his six American League home run championships and a Most Valuable Player Award, played in a World Series and hit 393 home runs. No one hit more home runs in the decade.

And no one at the time lingered so long in the batter's box to admire his power-ball handiwork. Though the behavior seemed contrary to his modest personality, Killebrew is widely regarded to have been the first player to delay his home run trot in order to monitor, and perhaps admire, his launches. Reggie Jackson, Dave Parker, Rickey Henderson and Barry Bonds took it to new levels, but they were mimicking Killer.

He hit the longest measured home runs at Metropolitan Stadium and Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, and in 1962 was the first to clear the left-field roof at Tiger Stadium in Detroit.

He was a farm-strong man readily recognizable because of his broad shoulders, relatively short frame -- he was generously listed at 5-foot-11 -- minimal hair, and, when in uniform, his signature No. 3. He emerged as the Babe Ruth of the Midwest, hitting more career home runs than all but Ruth, Henry Aaron, Willie Mays and Frank Robinson before his retirement at the end of the 1975 season. Until Alex Rodriguez passed him in 2009, Killebrew had hit more home runs in the American League than any right-handed hitter. His single-season home run total exceeded 40 eight times in his 14 seasons as a regular; he hit 39 once.

A nomad defensive player, he is one of three players to have hit at least 100 home runs at each of three positions -- first base, third base and left field.

Killebrew's 1,584 career RBIs rank in a tie for 36th place all-time. He led the league in RBIs three times, establishing his personal high, 140, in 1969, when he won the MVP. He placed in the top five in MVP balloting in five other years.

Hall of Fame status for Killebrew appeared to be a foregone conclusion when he retired, but he wasn't elected until 1984, his fourth year of eligibility.

Killer was revered in Minneapolis and St. Paul. A street alongside the Mall of America, built on the site of Metropolitan Stadium, where the Twins played, is named Killebrew Drive. His No. 3 was the first uniform number to be retired by the Twins in 1974, the year the team released him at age 38. His congeniality and unblemished personal resume only reinforced the popularity produced by his on-field achievements. He appeared in 2,435 games during his career and never was ejected. When his cancer was announced, former Twins teammate Tony Oliva said, "I tell everybody he's too nice to be a baseball player. He's a gentleman."

Earlier platitudes of that nature once prompted Killebrew to wonder aloud: "If I am such a nice guy, how'd I get this nickname?" He did so by bashing home runs to the farthest reaches of ballparks. He was as feared as any slugger. Dave DeBusschere, who made his athletic mark in the NBA, also pitched for the White Sox in 1962-63. He abandoned baseball, he said, for one reason: "Harmon Killebrew."

DeBusschere faced Killebrew four times -- struck him out, walked him and surrendered two home runs. The 443 other batters DeBusschere faced combined for eight. "I've got a better chance against Chamberlain," DeBusschere said years later. "Wilt's a lot bigger, but Harmon might have been stronger."

Killebrew's strength came from his Idaho upbringing, from hoisting 10-gallon milk cans onto trucks. Got milk? Indeed. It may be apocryphal, but his grandfather was said to be the strongest man in the Union army. He routinely won wrestling matches.

Killer's career was undermined by frequent debilitating injuries and also by the "bonus-baby" rule in effect when he signed with the Washington Senators in 1954. Because of the rule, the Senators were obligated to carry him on their big league roster for two seasons, so Killebrew didn't immediately benefit from the everyday Minor League schooling available to lesser prospects. Though his first turn at bat came at age 17 in '54, he had merely 280 plate appearances in the big leagues by the time he began playing regularly in 1959.

He hit 42 home runs that season, tying Rocky Colavito of the Indians for the league leadership and equaling the Senators' single-season record established two years earlier by Roy Sievers. Nine of the 11 highest single-season totals in Senators-Twins history were produced by Killebrew.

Idaho senator Herman Welker is said to have alerted the Senators of Killebrew's power and prowess. The Red Sox also pursued Killebrew as an amateur, but the Senators, at that time recognized for an ability to spot offensive potential, signed the Milkman for \$50,000.

Injuries, the most prominent of which occurred in the 1968 All-Star Game, were an issue for Killebrew. He was assigned to the disabled list for 55 days that summer after tearing his left hamstring while stretching for a throw at first base. He had merely 371 plate appearances, 48 following his return Sept. 1. He walked 70 times, but hit merely 17 home runs. He produced his finest season in 1969, when the Twins won the first American League West championship.

Killebrew is survived by his second wife, Nita, and nine children from two marriages.

Twins to honor Killebrew throughout season

Team will wear No. 3 patch for rest of 2011

Rhett Bollinger, MLB.com-5/17/11

SEATTLE -- The Twins immediately honored Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew by adding a commemorative patch bearing No. 3 on the right sleeve of their jerseys against the Mariners on Tuesday.

The Twins will wear that patch on their uniforms for the rest of the season as a tribute to Killebrew, who died on Tuesday at 74 after a battle with esophageal cancer. No. 3 was Killebrew's number and was formally retired by the Twins in 1975.

"It's fitting," Michael Cuddyer said. "If we could all wear the No. 3 that would be fitting too, but obviously that can't happen. But wearing the patch to remember him is really the least we could do."

Additionally, the club will hang Killebrew's No. 3 jersey in the dugout the rest of the season, and will don their throwback 1961 jerseys at all home games this year.

"We figured it would be [a] good tribute to pay to him for the rest of the season," said Cuddyer.

Twins president Dave St. Peter also said there will be new additions at Target Field that will be ready once the team returns home on Monday to host the Mariners.

"His signature, which is probably the cleanest, most classy signature in all of baseball, will adorn the outfield wall at Target field as a lasting symbol of the class that he brought every time he signed an autograph," St. Peter said at a press conference at Target Field on Tuesday. "In addition to that we will fly a No. 3 flag immediately adjacent to the Twins Territory flag just on the other side of Target Plaza."

On Tuesday, the Target Field grounds crew placed a black-and-white photo of Killebrew, believed to have been taken at Metropolitan Stadium in the '60s, under home plate, where it will remain for the rest of the season.

Killebrew has already been honored with a bronze statue outside Target Field that depicts his famous home run swing from the 1965 All-Star Game, when he tied the game up with a two-run shot in front of his home crowd at Metropolitan Stadium.

Funeral arrangements for Killebrew are pending, but St. Peter added that he anticipates that the most likely date for public services will be Thursday, May 26, which is the Twins' next off-day.

Execs, Twins players recall Killebrew fondly

Rhett Bollinger, MLB.com-5/17/11

Harmon Killebrew's passing Tuesday brought pleasant remembrances from Twins players, coaches and club executives. Even in the sadness of the day, the thoughts focused the life and joy of Killebrew, who was regarded by all as a class act.

"No individual has ever meant more to the Minnesota Twins organization and millions of fans across Twins Territory than Harmon Killebrew," said Twins president Dave St. Peter, who visited Killebrew in Arizona on Thursday.

"Harmon will long be remembered as one of the most prolific home run hitters in the history of the game and the leader of a group of players who helped lay the foundation for the long-term success of the Twins franchise and Major League Baseball in the Upper Midwest," St. Peter's statement continued. "However, more importantly, Harmon's legacy will be the class, dignity and humility he demonstrated each and every day as a Hall of Fame-quality husband, father, friend, teammate and man. The Twins extend heartfelt sympathies and prayers to the Killebrew family at this difficult time."

Killebrew, 74, was considered one of the faces of the Twins franchise, as he played nearly his entire career with the organization, making his debut with the then-Washington Senators on June 23, 1954, as a 17-year-old from Payette, Idaho. He went on to an illustrious career spanning 22 seasons, hitting 573 home runs while making 11 All-Star appearances.

"This is truly a sad day in the history of the Minnesota Twins organization," Twins chief executive officer Jim Pohlad said. "The Twins will remember Harmon for his many on-field contributions, but more importantly for the impeccable quality of his character, his great integrity and his compassion for everyone he encountered."

"Harmon Killebrew personified Hall of Fame excellence in every aspect of his dynamic life," National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum chairman Jane Forbes Clark said. "Since joining the Hall of Fame family in 1984, Harmon was a beacon of light among his fellow Hall of Famers, always smiling, always enjoying every moment that life delivered at his doorstep. We have so many fond memories of this wonderful baseball hero, and we will miss him enormously."

"Harmon was a Hall of Famer on and off the field," National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum president Jeff Idelson said. "He was baseball's version of Paul Bunyan, with his prodigious home run power, leading by example in the clubhouse and on the field. Off the field, he emanated class, dignity, and warmth, and he was a great humanitarian. He was so down-to-earth, you would never realize he was a baseball legend. It's ironic that his nickname was 'Killer,' as he was one of the nicest, most generous individuals to ever walk the earth."

"When I learned the news about Harmon today, I felt like I lost a family member," Twins catcher Joe Mauer said in a statement. "He has treated me like one of his own. It's hard to put into words what Harmon has meant to me. He first welcomed me into the Twins family as an 18-year-old kid and has continued to influence my life in many ways. He is someone I will never forget and will always treasure the time we spent together. Harmon will be missed but never forgotten."

Twins players and coaches also spoke before Tuesday's game against the Mariners in Seattle, recalling how humble and kind he was, and about the mentorship he provided.

"It's a tough day," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Of all the news of late, we knew that he was very sick, and it's just one of those pieces of news that you take, then you reflect, and your thoughts go out to Nita and the family."

"We've lost a really good person and a friend. More than anything, you look at how the man affected people's lives -- his career and his personality. He brought the whole package, and that's not something you see much around the game. The kindness and caring for the people he came into contact with. He left everybody with a very good impression."

Twins first baseman Justin Morneau was particularly saddened by Killebrew's passing, as they lived nearby each other in Arizona, and he loved to pick his brain about being such a prodigious power hitter.

"He was [the] best," Morneau said. "That's the only way to describe him. It's a tough one. Bad things happen to good people. Not that it makes too much difference, but at least he's not suffering anymore. But it still just doesn't seem fair."

Morneau was certainly impressed by the fact Killebrew hit more than 40 homers eight times in his career and was the 1969 American League MVP, but was also equally in awe of his legacy away from the field.

Killebrew was very active in the community, returning to an official capacity within the Twins organization in 1997 as a Special Assistant. In that role he became a regular participant at TwinsFest, the Twins Winter Caravan and other major community-oriented events.

In the community, Harmon and Nita Killebrew also founded the Killebrew Foundation, which helped raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for many charitable organizations across the country. Among those local organizations benefiting from the Killebrew Foundation was the Minnesota Twins Community Fund and Miracle Leagues of Minnesota.

"He was selfless and heavily involved in his charity work once he was done playing, with his foundation," said Morneau, the 2006 AL MVP. "So it was the kind of life we all hope we could end up leading. But I'm not sure anyone in here could measure [up] to the things he accomplished as both a person and a baseball player. So he gives you something to strive for, but it's tough."

Mauer had similar things to say about Killebrew's personality and work in the community, as he met him as an 18-year-old at TwinsFest

"The one thing I'd admired about him since the day I met him is how he treats everybody the same," said Mauer on Friday. "You wouldn't know he's a Hall of Famer when he walks into the room."

Mauer added that one of the most indelible marks that Killebrew left on him was simply working on his autograph, as Killebrew always had a fan-first attitude and made sure his name was legible when signing for fans.

"He would always get on me about my autograph," Mauer said with a smile.

Michael Cuddyer had a similar story, as Killebrew took him aside one time and told him to work on his signature.

"I did a signing with him on Caravan one year, and my signature looked pretty bad." Cuddyer said. "He told me, 'If I see this come through the line one more time I'm walking away and leaving, and the only person these people are going to be mad at is you, because you're the reason I'm going to leave.' From then on I've tried to make it as legible as I can. Every time I sign an autograph, he's in my head, thinking about how it looks."

Killebrew was also a fixture at Spring Training since the 2006 season, when he first joined Gardenhire and wore his No. 3 jersey out on the field. Gardenhire recalled that moment fondly, calling it his favorite memory with Killebrew.

"I thought that was really cool that day to see him in my office shaking my hand and telling me he was so excited to be on the field," Gardenhire said. "That was as great of a moment as you can have as a manager, knowing you rubbed elbows with Harmon Killebrew."

While at Spring Training, Killebrew spent time giving pointers to players, but more importantly, he took time to just chat with players to make them feel better and welcome.

"He never talked mechanics," center fielder Denard Span said. "He'd only say positive things like you're doing good, keep working, keep battling and just keep believing. It was always words of encouragement when he was around."

Killebrew also kept tabs on the young players in the organization, and he surprised many of the players by knowing plenty about them even though they had yet to play with the Twins. That's why the news was tough on Scott Baker, who met him in 2004 while pitching in Double-A.

"It's obviously a very sad day, not only for Twins fans, but a lot of baseball fans," Baker said. "Everybody talks about how great of a player he was, but more importantly we got to see how awesome of a guy he was. He was a great ambassador for the game and a great family man."

Killebrew even made it to Spring Training this year, even after being diagnosed with esophageal cancer in December. It was special for the players to see Killebrew, especially because they were aware of what he was going through.

"It meant a lot, because we knew what he was battling and what was going on with him," Span said. "For me, I didn't ask him how he was doing, but I wanted to so bad. I didn't want him to think about what was going on. I just wanted him to get his mind off [of] what was going on. So for him to be around us, it lifted him up."

But Killebrew's health took a turn for the worse, and many of the players were noticeably saddened by the news.

"It's tough news for everybody," said outfielder Jason Kubel. "He was a great guy, and he was always happy to see us, and we were always thrilled to see him."

The Twins decided to honor Killebrew by hanging up a No. 3 jersey in the dugout and will wear their throwback jerseys at Target Field all year.

"We figured it would be [a] good tribute to pay to him for the rest of the season," Cuddyer said. "I've asked everybody, and I think everybody has complied that we'll wear these uniforms all season when we're at home."

They're also going to wear a specially designed patch bearing Killebrew's No. 3 and will fly a No. 3 flag immediately adjacent to the Twins Territory flag near Target Plaza at Target Field.

"It's fitting," Cuddyer said. "If we could all wear the No. 3 that would be fitting too, but obviously that can't happen. But wearing the patch to remember him is really the least we could do."

Twins to hold memorial for Harmon Killebrew on May 26 at Target Field

Tom Pelissero, 1500ESPN.com-5/18/11

Target Field will host a public memorial service for Harmon Killebrew at 7 p.m. on Thursday, May 26.

The Minnesota Twins announced the plan on Wednesday, a day after Killebrew passed away after a battle with esophageal cancer. The legendary slugger was 74.

Additional details about the memorial will be released once they're available, the team said.

A public funeral service will be held at 10 a.m. Mountain time on Friday at Christ's Church of the Valley in Peoria, Ariz., near Killebrew's home in Scottsdale.

Killebrew will be buried in a private ceremony on Monday in his hometown of Payette, Idaho.

Was Harmon Killebrew the inspiration for the MLB logo?

Kevin Kaduk, Yahoo Sports-5/16/11

The baseball world is left to remember Harmon Killebrew's many contributions to the sport.

We're left to again wonder if a long-time rumor is actually true. The iconic Minnesota Twins legend and Hall of Famer is said to be the inspiration for the silhouette in MLB's iconic logo, which was designed in 1968.

There are some noticeable similarities that quickly lend credence to the theory: A hard nose drawn with sharp lines. Strong wrists positioned parallel to the shoulders. A round helmet pushed over a determined brow. A right-handed stance, though the logo's design allows it also to be viewed as left-handed, depending on how you look at it. (Note: Despite this being the cause of a "bar fight," I just learned this Monday. My mind is officially blown.)

So is it Killebrew that we're seeing any time MLB wants to put its official stamp on something? Paul Lukas of ESPN's Uni Watch Blog did some extensive research on the rumor back in 2008 and found out that it cannot yet be confirmed. Read his article [here](#).

Killebrew himself believes that he's in the middle of the logo and has told people of the Jerry West/NBA logo-type link for years. Meanwhile, Jerry Dior — the graphic designer generally credited for the logo's creation — claims that it is a composite he made from looking at a few different players.

Dior's claim should end the speculation right there, right? Well, here's the catch: Dior says he can't remember the specific player photographs he used to research the design and Killebrew says his claim is based on first-hand experience with something he saw.

So we're saying there's a chance ... here's what Killebrew told Lukas back in 2008:

"I was in the commissioner's office one day in the late 1960s ... and there was a man sitting at a table. He had a photograph of me in a hitting position, and he had one of those grease pencils that you see at a newspaper, and he was marking that thing up. I said, 'What are you doing with that?' and he said they were going to make a new Major League Baseball logo. I never thought any more about it. And then the logo came out and it did look like me. The only change was the angle of the bat — they changed that to kind of make it fit more into the design."

As Lukas and his detail-obsessed readers point out, there are a few players from the '60s who could have fit the description and it doesn't take too much to imagine another player serving as the model. So because Killebrew's stance wasn't as completely unique as, say, Julio Franco's, we're probably never going to reach the universal conclusion that it's him in that logo. Especially with that change in the angle of the bat.

Still, it's interesting to note that Killebrew's outstanding career, with its 573 home runs, was so iconic that such a claim could be repeated and accepted as fact for years without anyone questioning the tie further. Even if one of Killebrew's photos never passed over Dior's design desk, it's easy to see why so many people wanted to make the connection.

In a way, that's an even greater tribute to Killebrew than an outright acknowledgement he's the mystery man in the middle of Major League Baseball's official mark.

Harmon Killebrew was a treasure

Jim Caple, ESPN.com-5/17/11

Before there was Joe Mauer, before there was Kirby Puckett, there was Harmon Killebrew, a quiet but powerful block of a man who led the Upper Midwest in annual goosebump production by slamming home runs as far as the eye can see -- and you can see a long way in Minnesota.

"When Harmon and the Twins moved to Minnesota in 1961, I was 5 years old. When they went to the World Series in 1965, I was 9 and more aware," St. Paul native Paul Molitor said. "I got to go to one game a year on my birthday and I collected all the Coca-Cola player bottle caps. I loved all the Twins but Harmon was the guy. He was the guy I pretended to be when I played baseball in the backyard and No. 3 was the number I wanted to wear when I played Little League.

"Not many people are able to have the chance to be friends with their boyhood hero but I was lucky. And I couldn't have picked a better man. The fact that Harmon played baseball -- it's like the cliché about the Hall of Fame: That he was a Hall

of Fame player is way down on the list of what made him special. He was one of the most unassuming, humble men. He was a great ambassador for the Twins and a great ambassador for baseball.

"And that's why, for a lot of people, this has been a tough time."

Killebrew passed away Tuesday morning at the age of 74 after a battle with esophageal cancer. The Hall of Fame slugger who hit 573 career home runs (11th all-time) had been fighting the disease since December. After all treatment failed, he decided to enter hospice care to surround himself with family and friends.

According to one famous story, when Killebrew was a boy growing up in Payette, Idaho, he and his brother were playing baseball with their father in the yard when Harmon's mother yelled to complain that they were ruining the grass. "We're not raising grass," his father yelled back, "we're raising boys."

However much grass was ruined, it was for a good cause. The Washington Senators signed Killebrew to a \$30,000 contract after he graduated from high school in 1954. Under the existing bonus baby rules, the Senators were required to keep him on the major league roster for two years. Killebrew spent two seasons on the bench (batting only 93 times) before getting needed experience in the minors in 1956-58. He returned to the majors in 1959. That was his first real season in the majors and he led the league in home runs (42). He led the league another five times over the following 11 seasons. In the 12-season span from 1959-70, Killebrew averaged 40 homers -- back in the days when 40 home runs were a lot.

Although Carl Yastrzemski famously won the Triple Crown in 1967, he and Killebrew tied for the league lead in home runs that season with 44.

When the Senators moved to Minnesota in 1961, Killebrew instantly became the face of the Twins and was easily their most popular player. An 11-time All-Star, he finished in the top four of MVP voting five times, winning the award in 1969. That season, he hit 49 home runs with 140 RBIs (still Twins records), and scored 106 runs, walked 145 times and had a .427 on-base percentage in leading the Twins to the division title. Minnesota was swept in the ALCS when the Orioles walked Killebrew six times in the three-game series.

Former Twins catcher Earl Battey once said that the team without Killebrew was "like dressing up for a formal affair with a white tie and tails and then wearing muddy shoes."

But eventually the Twins did put on those muddy shoes. The last season Killebrew hit 40 home runs was 1970. By 1974, his numbers were down to .222 with 13 home runs, and the Twins released him. He signed with the Royals, hitting .199 with 14 home runs before retiring.

His 573 career home runs are more than Mickey Mantle hit and more than all but four players had hit at that point (only Hank Aaron, Babe Ruth, Willie Mays and Frank Robinson had more). Killebrew's stroke was so powerful that many -- including Harmon -- believed it was the basis for major league baseball's logo, though the designer said that isn't the case.

Killebrew's nickname was "Killer," but that was simply a play off his last name and as much of a misnomer as calling a bald guy "Curly." He was one of the nicest, gentlest men you could ever meet in baseball.

"There are so many Harmon Killebrew stories that are all positive. There was not a negative with Harmon. There can't be. Can't be," Bert Blyleven, his former teammate, said. "That's what I'll miss most about Harmon. Not his playing but his personality and the way he treated people."

Former Twins media relations director Tom Mee said Killebrew treated everyone "as if they were his next-door neighbors." Blyleven agreed: "If you came over for milk, he would give you milk. He would give you coffee. Whatever you need. Harmon was that type of guy."

"He didn't differentiate how he treated other people based on their status or social standing," Molitor said. "Whether you were an 18-year-old minor leaguer or a clubhouse worker, you got the same Harmon. And that was a pretty good Harmon to get."

"I didn't have evil intentions but I guess I did have power," Killebrew once said.

Boy, did he ever. And what was most impressive about his power is that it came from such a compact body (in "Ball Four," Jim Bouton refers to him as "the Fat Kid"). While he had massive upper body strength -- in perhaps his most extraordinary show of power, he was able to extract a \$125,000 salary from Twins owner Calvin Griffith -- Killebrew was short by today's standards. He was charitably listed as 6-foot on his Baseball Reference page. Seeing him later in his life when he was shorter than that, it was astounding that he had been capable of so many tape-measure home runs -- his longest was estimated at 520 feet.

"I have that same feeling when I see guys like him or Hank Aaron compared to the sluggers we have today," Molitor said. "McGwire, Sosa, Bonds. Whatever your feelings about them, there is just a totally different physicality. And it adds to the lore of Harmon as a hitter. He was known for his towering home runs -- it seemed like he didn't hit many low line drives -- and he hit them so high and far the ball looked more like a Titleist than a Rawlings."

"He was a lumberjack type of a player," Blyleven said. "He was 5-11 but he was burly chested ... just naturally strong. He had that short, compact swing and when he hit the ball, it just jumped off the bat."

Killebrew's bat thundered but he was about as loud and ostentatious as an acre of corn growing on Minnesota farmland. Paul Dickson's "Baseball's Greatest Quotations" is a 524-page collection of quotes about and related to baseball. Reggie Jackson has five pages of quotes. Mickey Mantle has six pages of quotes. Even Henry Kissinger, Groucho Marx and The Chicken are quoted. There is not a single quote by or about Killebrew. He hit 573 home runs, won an MVP, took the Twins to their first World Series and is in the Hall of Fame, but he apparently never said anything memorable enough for the book.

"It's because he didn't say anything controversial," Mee said. "He would give a direct answer but not necessarily the one the writer was looking for. He didn't belittle any pitcher. He didn't belittle any fielder or management. He just gave a direct, fair answer."

Indeed. Asked by a Sports Illustrated writer in 1963 whether he had any unusual hobbies, Killebrew replied, "Just washing the dishes, I guess."

That personality fit in superbly in Minnesota, where fans don't much care for people who call attention to themselves. And despite that final season with Kansas City and coaching jobs with other teams, Killebrew will always be associated with the Twins, who retired his No. 3. He was a broadcaster for the team for several years and frequently appeared at spring training to provide instruction to Minnesota players.

"He epitomized the history of the Minnesota Twins," manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Harmon and Tony Oliva. He's a Hall of Famer and one of the kindest people you could ever meet in your life. And we want our players to emulate him. There aren't too many people who met Harmon and walked away disappointed. He means everything to the organization."

The Twins have been hanging his No. 3 jersey in their dugout ever since he announced he was entering hospice care and entering the final days of life.

You can still see the fold-down seat where Killebrew's longest home run landed an estimated 520 feet from home plate some 44 years ago. Take the Killebrew Drive exit to the Mall of America, built on the original site of old Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington. Park your car, enter the mall, go inside to the amusement park at the center, look up three stories to the southeast wall and you'll see the seat attached above the Paul Bunyan Log Chute ride. It's an appropriate spot. Harmon Killebrew, Paul Bunyan ... both strong men who produced prodigious feats while swinging a hunk of wood. Bunyan chopped down entire forests. Killebrew chopped down opposing pitchers, hitting home runs and bringing Minnesotans to their feet applauding with joy.

Killebrew touched many lives

Robby Incmikoski, FSNorth.com-5/18/11

It was a normal day at the ballpark, but yet it wasn't. It was the day the Twins lost a legend, and more. Not just a great ballplayer, but a great human being. He was a legend that touched many lives, whether you had the pleasure of knowing him for years, or just had the pleasure of meeting him once. He touched all of us – fans, teammates, family, friends and colleagues alike – in one way or another.

Harmon Killebrew left us on May 17th, but on this day, his presence was still felt throughout the Twins clubhouse at Safeco Field in Seattle. When you walked into the clubhouse and looked immediately to your right, there it was....Killebrew's famous number three jersey hanging in the locker stall belonging to Twins Equipment Manager Rod McCormick. That jersey would be hung in the Twins dugout by the bat rack. The TV was on in the clubhouse, and players were preparing for a game against the Seattle Mariners like they normally would, but there was a vibe of sadness that wasn't there a day earlier.

"I was very fortunate to have a pretty good relationship with him. I was able to have a bunch of talks and conversations with him," said Twins outfielder Michael Cuddyer. "It's sad that the end of his life is here but it's easy to celebrate his life. That's what we have to do now, celebrate his life with the fans and baseball."

Twins Hall of Famer Bert Blyleven echoed those sentiments during the telecast of the Twins 2-1 win thanks to, coincidentally enough, a two-run single by Cuddyer in the first inning off Cy Young winner Felix Hernandez.

"Today is a day to celebrate," Blyleven said. "Harmon was a man that touched many lives in a positive way, and we can celebrate his life and what he meant to everyone he came in touch with."

The Twins celebrated a win on this night. The win snapped a nine-game losing streak, but to win on such an emotional day touched the men in that clubhouse.

"It's a very emotional day," said Twins Manager Ron Gardenhire, in a somber tone after the ballgame. "The moment of silence before the game was very hard. To have that number three sitting in our dugout and to win the game....it was special."

Cuddyer had a special relationship with the "Killer", crediting him for what has become his legible autograph over the years.

"Obviously, you wanted to go out and use these three hours to kind of get your mind off of this tragedy even though you can't. It's impossible to do that. There was no better time to win than today."

As broadcasters, it is our job to connect the team with the fans, and I'd be doing a disservice if I didn't pass along the story of the first time I met Harmon Killebrew.

It was 2009 during a game at the Metrodome. I was sitting next to my colleague Marney Gellner, and Harmon walked past us. He said "Hi, Marney" as he kept walking and looked at me and nodded "hello" at me. I said "hello" back, and he walked over to a seat in the next section and remained there for a few more innings. "Is that Harmon Killebrew?," I asked Marney. "Yes, it is," she answered.

As I walked near him a few innings later, I figured I'd introduce myself to him and shake his hand. As I approached him, I said "Hello Mr. Killebrew, my name is Ro...." He stopped me mid-sentence. "Hi Robby, I like your work on TV." Standing there with a look of amazement on my face, we chatted for a few moments. Those moments will never be forgotten. That tells you all you need to know about Harmon Killebrew. He was awesome on the field, and amazing off of it. There are many stories like this, and it will be a pleasure to read them all.

Rest in peace, Harmon.....A true gentleman who will be sorely missed by all of us.

Dick Bremer remembers his hero

FSNorth.com-5/17/11

It's not often in life that we as adults get a chance to meet the heroes of our childhood. And then when it happens, most of the time it's a disappointment. The weight of our expectations is too heavy for most shoulders to bear. For many of us in Twins Territory, myself included, we had just the opposite experience with Harmon Killebrew.

We know about his baseball prowess, it got him into the Baseball Hall of Fame, and we might have heard what a gentleman he was on and off the field. But until you met him and got to know him, you couldn't imagine how compassionate he was, how selfless he was to his very core.

He was involved in so many charities; he raised millions of dollars for leukemia research when his former teammate and friend Danny Thompson passed away. He raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for The Miracle League, just so kids and adults with special needs could play the game of baseball that he so dearly loved. And, ironically, he raised a lot of money and awareness for hospice care in Arizona. And then if you had a cause or charity, and you wanted Harmon to do you a favor, it became his cause or charity.

So for all the reasons and a lot more, tonight we say 'goodbye' to the first Twin inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, and a man who, 37 years ago, last played for the Twins but remains the face of this franchise. And if you allow me tonight, I'm going to say 'goodbye' to my hero.

Twins win one for Harmon

Associated Press-5/17/11

SEATTLE (AP) -- Michael Cuddyer capped off an emotional day for Minnesota with a big hit that helped the Twins end their nine-game losing streak.

Cuddyer drilled a two-run, first-inning single to supply the winning margin as Francisco Liriano outdueled Felix Hernandez and the Twins beat the Seattle Mariners 2-1 on Tuesday night.

The victory came hours after the death of Minnesota great Harmon Killebrew.

"In talking about Harmon, I've always said you want to be a better person when he's around, you want to be a better player when he's around," said Cuddyer, who was quite close to Killebrew, "so maybe tonight, you don't want to say you tried harder because you try hard every day, but I don't know. Coincidence or higher power? Maybe he was looking down on us tonight."

Liriano (3-5) was nearly as stingy as his no-hitter May 3 against the White Sox. He allowed three singles, walked one and had a season-high nine strikeouts. Matt Capps got the final three outs for his sixth save in eight opportunities.

"I think it (going against Hernandez) helped me stay focused, taking it one pitch at a time, one inning at a time," Liriano said.

Hernandez (4-4), last season's Cy Young Award winner, allowed three hits and two runs in eight innings. He walked three and struck out nine.

Hernandez couldn't settle in early and it cost him. He opened the game by issuing a four-pitch walk to Denard Span. Matt Tolbert's grounder forced Span at second. Then Hernandez walked Jason Kubel.

Justin Morneau bounced out to first, advancing both runners. Michael Cuddyer followed with his two-run single.

"I'm not trying to stay around with him. I'm not trying to work an at-bat with him," said Cuddyer, who hit the first pitch Hernandez threw to him. "He's too nasty to do that. I just wanted a pitch that I thought I could handle. It happened to be the first pitch, up in the zone and I got a barrel on it."

The Mariners held a moment of silence before the game in honor of Killebrew. The club also put together a scoreboard video tribute to him during the third inning. The Twins hung his No. 3 jersey in the clubhouse all afternoon then brought it down to the dugout for the game.

Cuddyer had built a close relationship with Killebrew over the years, spending hours in spring camps talking as much about hitting as life.

"After a day like this, it was nice to go out there and use the three hours to try to get your mind off this tragedy, even though you can't," he said. "It's impossible to. We wanted to go out and get the win. There was no better time to get it."

Cuddyer had two of the three hits yielded by Hernandez.

That first inning was the time the Twins needed to reach Hernandez. After that, he was back in his denied form.

Hernandez, who needed just six pitches to retire the side in both the second and sixth innings, finished strong. He allowed only one hit after one out in the fourth and struck out seven from the fifth through the eighth.

The Twins built some mild threats. In the fourth, they had runners on second and third with two outs but Hernandez struck out Rene Rivera. In the fifth with runners on first and second with one out, Hernandez induced Kubel to hit a one-hopper back to him. He turned it into a double play.

The Mariners, held to just one hit by Liriano through the first four innings, mounted a two-out rally in the first. Liriano started it by hitting Brendan Ryan in the leg. Michael Saunders singled to center as Ryan raced to third on the hit-and-run. Ichiro Suzuki followed with a lazy RBI single to center.

"That one inning (fifth) he got two quick outs then had a heck of a rough time getting out of it," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Other than that, he was all over the zone making them swing the bats.

"There was a lot going on today. It was very emotional before the game and very emotional after the game. Tonight was kind of special for a lot of reasons."

Of the 41 games the Mariners have played, 21 have been decided by two runs or fewer. They are 7-9 in 1-run games.

The Twins have played 40 games. This was the 28th time they have scored three runs or fewer. They have won four of those games.

Mariners manager Eric Wedge argued a close play at second in the ninth and earned an ejection from umpire Jerry Meals.

NOTES: The Twins staff hustled to order a patch reflecting Killebrew's No. 3 and had them sewn on all the uniforms right sleeves before taking the field. "It's fitting. If we all wear No. 3 that would be fitting, too. But that's not possible," Cuddyer said. "But to be able to wear the patch to remember him is the least we can do." ... CF Franklin Gutierrez will be activated to the 25-man roster for Wednesday's game and RHP Tom Wilhelmson will be optioned out to make room. Gutierrez had been on rehab all season because of stomach gastritis.

Liriano dominates, ends losing streak

Lefty allows one run, strikes out nine in seven innings

Rhett Bollinger, MLB.com-5/18/11

SEATTLE -- At long last, the Twins' nine-game losing streak is over, and perhaps it's fitting it ended an emotional day for the team after the death of Hall of Famer and Twins legend Harmon Killebrew on Tuesday.

It came on a night when left-hander Francisco Liriano returned to form, striking out nine and walking just one over seven quality innings to help lead the Twins to a 2-1 win over the Mariners at Safeco Field.

With Killebrew's death weighing heavy on their minds and in their hearts, the Twins simply managed to scrape out a win against last year's American League Cy Young Award winner, Felix Hernandez.

"It's nice to get out there and shake hands," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "There was a lot going on today and it was a very emotional day before the game and after the game. So it was a nice win. We needed a win, and on this day it's probably more special."

The victory helped Minnesota avoid enduring a 10-game losing streak for the first time since going 10 games without a win from Sept. 9-18, 1998. But more importantly, the club was able to honor Killebrew with a much-needed win.

"It's nice because obviously we wanted to use these three hours to get our minds off the tragedy, even though you can't," said Michael Cuddyer, the longest tenured Twins player on the roster. "It's impossible. But we wanted to go out and get a win, and there was no better time than today."

The Twins struck for their two runs in the first inning, when Denard Span and Jason Kubel both drew walks, before Cuddyer drove home a pair with a two-out single. Cuddyer's single came on the first pitch he saw from Hernandez, which was a belt-high fastball that caught too much of the plate.

"I'm not trying to stay around and work an at-bat against him because he's too nasty," Cuddyer said. "I just wanted to see a pitch I could handle, and it just so happened it was the first pitch and it was up in the zone and I was able to get a barrel on it."

It was all the offense Minnesota could muster against Hernandez, who surrendered just three hits to go along with three walks and nine strikeouts over eight innings.

"It was a pretty good outing for me, but if you give up two runs against Liriano, you have to keep working hard to keep your team in the game," Hernandez said. "That's what I did, but Liriano was pretty good."

Liriano was more than pretty good, as he dominated the Mariners for seven frames, as he allowed only three hits and tied a season-low one walk in his second start since throwing a no-hitter against the White Sox on May 3.

"The thing about Frankie is that if he goes out there and throws strikes he's just as dominant as Felix Hernandez," Cuddyer said. "It's just a matter of him going out there and not walking guys. And tonight he didn't walk guys, and that's what he can do."

It marked the sixth career start for Liriano, 27, against his good friend Hernandez, 25, and he again came up victorious to improve to 4-2 against him.

"I like to compete, so anytime I go up there against a guy like that, I try to do my best to keep zeros on the board," Liriano said. "So tonight, everything was working for me pretty good."

Seattle scored its lone run in the fifth inning, when Brendan Ryan was hit by a pitch with two outs and scored after back-to-back singles from Michael Saunders and Ichiro Suzuki. But Liriano was able to get of the jam with runners on the corners by striking out Chone Figgins to end the frame.

Liriano struck out Figgins with a changeup, but said it was his slider that was most effective, as he mixed in 38 of them as well as 21 changeups and 51 fastballs, according to MLB.com's Pitch FX data.

"Before I wasn't using my slider that much, but now I'm using it more like before," said Liriano, who threw 110 pitches, with 72 going for strikes. "But at the same time, it's all about location."

Relievers Glen Perkins and Matt Capps combined to shut down the Mariners over the final two innings to preserve the win for the Twins.

Capps appeared to get a generous call on a fielder's choice at second base for the second out of the ninth inning -- that saw Mariners manager Eric Wedge get tossed -- but replays showed Miguel Olivo slid into Alexi Casilla's foot and was out on a close play. Adam Kennedy then grounded out on the first pitch he saw from Capps to end the game.

"The bullpen was super," Gardenhire said. "Perkins really threw it and Capps got his guys out there in the end."

Twins hit Oakland going for second win in a row

Arden Zwelling, MLB.com-5/18/11

A bad season got worse for the Twins with Tuesday's passing of Hall of Famer and Minnesota legend Harmon Killebrew at the age of 74.

Killebrew played 14 seasons in a Twins uniform -- after seven with the Washington Senators, who moved to Minnesota in 1961 -- stroking 573 home runs and collecting 1,574 RBIs in those 21 years, both franchise records.

"Baseball, as bad as we're playing, is kind of secondary to all this stuff," said Twins first baseman Justin Morneau. "We'll see if we can get him a win. That would be nice."

That's exactly what the Twins did, as they hung on for a 2-1 victory over Felix Hernandez and the Mariners. Morneau and company will have a chance to make it two in a row Wednesday against the A's.

Many of the team's veteran players addressed the team in the clubhouse after Monday's 5-2 loss, which extended the team's losing streak to nine -- the Twins' longest since 1998.

"The thing is, if you're scuffling yourself, it's hard to call people out," said manager Ron Gardenhire. "But there comes a point where it has to be done. Last night there were some veterans who stepped up, and it was good, it was really good, because like I said, [coaches] can say so much, I can only say so much. I think we're at the point where players have to police themselves, too."

Whatever was said obviously worked, as the Twins bounced back with just their fourth win of the month. Right-hander Carl Pavano -- who is 2-4 with a 5.89 ERA -- will be tasked with containing the A's and helping the Twins continue to get back on track.

Oakland will counter with Brandon McCarthy, who is looking to bounce back from a rough outing Friday against the White Sox. The right-hander faced one over the minimum through six innings but suffered through a rough seventh, when he allowed three hits, two walks and committed a throwing error as the White Sox tagged him for four runs.

But the Twins present a good matchup for McCarthy to right the ship, as the 27-year-old has a 1.63 ERA in his seven career appearances against Minnesota.

In fact, McCarthy's only win of the season came against the Twins on April 10, when he allowed nine hits and two earned runs over 7 1/3 innings while striking out five.

"Hopefully I can throw well against them. It's not an easy lineup to face -- there's a lot of good hitters in that lineup, there's smart hitters in that lineup," McCarthy said. "They're like any other team, where if you make your pitches, you'll probably come out on top."

Twins: Killebrew honored

The Twins will wear a commemorative No. 3 patch on the right sleeve of their uniforms for the rest of the season to honor Killebrew.

The Twins retired the legend's number in 1975. The club will also hang Killebrew's No. 3 jersey in the dugout for the rest of the season and print Killebrew's signature on the outfield wall at Target Field.

"It's fitting," said Twins infielder Michael Cuddyer. "If we could all wear the number 3 that would be fitting too, but obviously that can't happen. But wearing the patch to remember him is really the least we could do."

A's: Bailey nears return

Injured closer Andrew Bailey is inching closer to rejoining the team after declaring himself ready for a Minor League rehab stint Tuesday.

The 26-year-old right-hander has yet to pitch this season as he nurses a strained right forearm. He has made two extended spring training appearances and will throw long toss on Wednesday to determine how his arm has responded to the work.

If Bailey feels good Wednesday, he will begin a Minor League rehab assignment for at least four games before rejoining the team.

"I felt great," Bailey said. "I think it's definitely more of a baseball thing now and hopefully it responds the way we want it to tomorrow."

Worth noting

The A's went off on the Angels for 14 runs on Tuesday, their first double-digit run total this season and the most they have scored since July 10, 2010, when they put up 15 -- also against the Angels. ... Cuddyer extended his hitting streak to four games Tuesday, going 2-for-3 with two RBIs. ... Wednesday's game will be the Twins' 26th on the road this season -- the second-highest total in the Majors. Minnesota is 9-16 on the road, batting .212 with a team ERA of 4.51.

Ron Gardenhire hopes young Twins heed veterans' harsh message

John Shipley, Pioneer Press-5/18/11

SEATTLE - When the smoke cleared Tuesday, the Twins' clubhouse seemed a little happier, though with the team still sitting on baseball's worst record, Ron Gardenhire wasn't about to take his foot off the pedal.

Instead, the manager revealed his glee over the veterans' decision late Monday to give some of the team's younger players the what-for after a 5-2 loss to the Mariners that night.

Asked if he thought the tense postgame meeting helped, Gardenhire said, "Uh, I think that remains to be seen."

"I don't go around asking the players how they responded to somebody screaming at them in the clubhouse," he added. "I know how myself and my coaching staff felt last night: We were pretty happy; we were pretty excited, to tell you the truth."

"I don't go around the clubhouse asking whose feelings are hurt too awful much, but I hope they got a message, some of them. And I think they did."

After a listless effort Monday night that led to a ninth straight loss, Minnesota's veteran players dished out some tough love to a large group of young players, many of whom are adjusting to the big leagues for the first time.

"We need to do this together, and we need to figure it out together - because that's what it takes to win games," said outfielder Jason Kubel, who led the team with a .329 batting average and 20 runs batted in before Tuesday's late game.

In the interest of keeping clubhouse matters inside the clubhouse, names were withheld, but the likeliest suspects are Justin Morneau and Michael Cuddyer, team leaders even when the roster is stocked with veterans.

Because most of the team's veterans are scuffling along with everyone else - Cuddyer went into Tuesday's game batting .252 with seven RBIs, and Morneau was at .230 and hampered by injuries the past two seasons - Gardenhire speculated there was a reluctance to speak up.

But there didn't need to be, he said. Cuddyer has been a key member of all six Twins division winners the past nine years, willing and able to play any defensive position the team has needed him to play. Morneau was the 2006 American League most valuable player and one of baseball's hottest hitters (.345, 18 homers) when he was lost to a concussion last July 7.

Young players, the manager said, need to respect the body of work.

"Maybe that's a problem out there," Gardenhire said, nodding toward Safeco's visiting clubhouse. "You understand that part of it? Maybe you and I might, but maybe some people out there don't get it, and that's the problem: We're trying to make sure that people get it, what we try to do around here.

"It happens when you have a whole bunch of new people trying to keep their foot in the door, trying to make a name for themselves in the big leagues and trying to stay in the big leagues."

The Twins have eight players on the 25-man roster, five of them position players, who have yet to play a full major league season. When pitcher Phil Dumatrait was called up Monday, he became the 11th player to move from Rochester to the big leagues this season.

"We haven't had this many (rookies) at one time in a while," Gardenhire said. "It happens. You lose sight of the team concept, and it becomes an individual 'I got my hit' kind of thing."

That, Gardenhire said, is "what you're really fighting against more than anything else: a team concept rather than an 'I got mine today.' We can't have that, and that's kind of some of the stuff we've been fighting a little bit. It's natural for young players, but it's not acceptable."

Twins postgame: Emotional days in Seattle

Neal LaVelle, Star Tribune-5/18/11

CLEARING THE AIR?

The atmosphere in the clubhouse is at issue after Twins manager Ron Gardenhire told us following Monday's loss to Seattle that the veteran players were upset about some things and decided to address those issues with a young player or two.

Gardy didn't provide further details (actually, it sounds like a couple players were surprised that much got out) but I think his point was to make sure the veterans on the team control some things in the clubhouse even if they aren't playing well.

Gardy was asked before the game if he thought everything has been ironed out.

“I think that remains to be seen,” he said. “I don't go around asking the players how the reception was of somebody screaming at them in the clubhouse. I ask how they are feeling all the time. I know myself and my coaching staff felt after last night that we were pretty happy we were pretty excited.

“But I'm not going around to check and see how many people's feelings were hurt too awful much, I hope some of them got a message and understand a little bit more and I think they did because I did walk around after it was over and talked with a few people and not about their feelings but if they understand and that it is not personal.

“But it is personal because you have to have a lot of courage and a lot of character to play this game. When you're playing for a whole team and not as an individual...that's when you have to have courage. You have to be able to give yourself up in situations for the betterment of the team and do what's right.”

In recent weeks, Gardenhire has talked about veterans having a hard time leading when they aren't playing well. A coaching staff shouldn't have to police everything that goes wrong on the field, the veteran players have to accept that role. Sounds like Gardy wants them to make their voices heard.

FRANKIE FEASTS ON FELIX

Francisco Liriano and Felix Hernandez are friends, going back to winter ball. Liriano said they spoke on the phone when he arrived in Seattle.

Somehow, they have already faced each other six times in their careers.

Somehow, Liriano is 4-2 against his buddy.

“I like to compete,” Liriano said. “I like to face a guy like that. I think it helps me be more focused in the game.”

No kidding. Liriano held Seattle to one run over seven innings with a season-high nine strikeouts. It was the Liriano the Twins need. He's 3-5 and lowered his ERA from 7.07 to 6.12.

O.K., the Mariners' offense isn't that sweet. But Liriano threw strikes and looked confident.

The Felix Factor baffles me. Here are the scores of the games in which they have started against each other: 3-1, 4-2, 6-1, 9-6, 2-1 and now 2-1. Liriano has won his last three starts opposite King Felix.

I love this game.

SWEET SORROW

My apologies for not posting a pre-game blog tonight. I was hammering away at stories and realized in the fifth inning that I never posted lineups.

It was a crazy day that began, for me, around 6:30 a.m. when my phone rang.

My best friends in town have tried, in recent years, to have a baby but have had some tough moments. They gave it another shot last year and it paid off this morning when their daughter called to tell me that she had new baby brother.

I'm going to be the Godfather.

I was thrilled. I talked to the daughter. Then the proud papa called and we talked. Then he puts his wife on, and I'm like, “Man, she just had a C-section. Do not put her on the phone!!” He did anyway, so we talked. She was wiped out, but relieved.

So I'm in my hotel room overjoyed for my friends...then my e-mail alert went off about 2 hours later about Harmon Killebrew passing away.

I spent the day with both events on my mind. Happy for my friends, sad about Harmon. I'm not from here and never saw him play in person or on television. I do know that he was a true gentleman with a vice grip for a handshake. I never saw him mad. I wish I could have seen him play. Based on highlights, the man never was cheated on a swing.

I've lost both my parents to cancer. Damn that disease.

A friend just sent me an e-mail that read, ``you are going to remember the baby's birthday with sweet sorrow." She's right.

So hug your kids, max out your time with your parents, don't totally give up on the Twins and I'll check in from Oakland tomorrow.

Liriano's gem helps Twins finally halt slide

He outpitched Seattle ace Felix Hernandez with seven strong innings to end the team's nine-game losing skid.

Neal LaVelle, Star Tribune-5/18/11

SEATTLE - After dealing with all the emotions of a frustrating nine-game losing streak to go along with the death of a franchise icon, the Twins finally had something good to feel about Tuesday night.

Francisco Liriano threw seven strong innings and some early offense held up in a 2-1 victory over Felix Hernandez and the Mariners, ending the Twins' worst losing streak in more than a decade.

"It was a very emotional day before the game, and very emotional after the game," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said.

With the death of Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew on Tuesday morning, the Mariners held a moment of silence before the game and also showed a video tribute for Killebrew after the first inning.

"The early part of the game, when they had the moment of silence, that was very hard," Gardenhire said.

In six career matchups, Liriano is 4-2 against Hernandez, the 2010 American League Cy Young Award winner and Liriano's close friend. The Twins also won 2-1 the last time the two hooked up, on June 5, 2009, at Safeco Field.

The Twins got all their offense on Michael Cuddyer's two-out, two-run single to center in the first inning. The hit scored Matt Tolbert and Jason Kubel, making Hernandez pay for two walks.

Liriano (3-5) took over from there with the help of a nasty slider and a well-placed fastball. Making only his second start since his May 3 no-hitter in Chicago, he gave up one run over seven innings on three hits and a walk with a season-high nine strikeouts.

Glen Perkins touched 96 miles per hour on the radar gun as he pitched a scoreless eighth. Matt Capps pitched the ninth for his sixth save. A gift second out helped, as it appeared baserunner Miguel Olivo beat Danny Valencia's throw to second. Seattle manager Eric Wedge argued with umpire Jerry Meals and was ejected.

Injury updates

- Infielder Tsuyoshi Nishioka continues to make progress in his recovery from a broken left fibula, but he is not quite ready to play in minor league games.

Nishioka has been working out in Fort Myers, Fla., for nearly three weeks while trying to work out the remaining soreness in the leg. He is taking batting and fielding practice daily and recently has been able to sprint.

Trainer Dave Pruemer said Nishioka is making good progress, but the Twins aren't ready to let him play games yet. Gardenhire isn't ready to say where Nishioka will play, either second base or shortstop, when he returns.

- Designated hitter Jim Thome (left oblique) got five at-bats in an extended spring training game Tuesday and will play in another game Wednesday.
- Outfielder Jason Repko (right quadriceps) went 2-for-5, including a solo home run, and scored twice in his first game of a minor league rehabilitation assignment at Class AAA Rochester.
- Lefthander Jose Mijares (left elbow strain) had a magnetic resonance imaging exam of his elbow that showed no structural damage, so he will continue his rehabilitation program.

Twins Daily: Liriano drives skid-snapping win with Killebrew on sleeve

Tom Pelissero, 1500ESPN.com-5/17/11

On the day the Minnesota Twins said goodbye to one of their greatest players, they also ended one of the worst slides in their recent history. Francisco Liriano struck out nine in seven strong innings and Michael Cuddyer's two-run single in the first held up in Tuesday's 2-1 win over the Seattle Mariners, snapping the Twins' nine-game losing streak.

The skinny

No-hitter notwithstanding, Liriano may have turned in his best performance in a largely disappointing season.

The left-hander allowed one run on three hits and walked only one, although he still needed 110 pitches (72 strikes) to get through seven innings.

Pitching with a lead surely didn't hurt. Cuddyer drove the first pitch he saw from Mariners starter Felix Hernandez into left-center field, scoring Matt Tolbert and Jason Kubel to give the Twins (13-27) a lead they never relinquished.

Players took the field with No. 3 sewn into the right sleeves of their jerseys -- a tribute to legendary slugger Harmon Killebrew, who passed away on Tuesday morning after a battle with cancer -- and turned in one of their cleaner outings.

They needed it to beat Hernandez, who allowed two runs on three hits in eight innings and struck out nine, including five of the last six batters he faced. The Twins were 1-for-7 with runners in scoring position and left five on base.

Turning points

A wayward fastball plunked Brendan Ryan and sparked a two-out Mariners rally in the fifth inning.

Michael Saunders and Ichiro Suzuki followed with singles, the latter bringing home Ryan and advancing the potential tying run to third.

Liriano fell behind Chone Figgins 2-0. But after a visit from pitching coach Rick Anderson, Liriano threw his next three pitches in the zone, and catcher Rene Rivera held onto Figgins' foul tip to secure the strikeout and end the frame.

Seattle (17-24) didn't get another base runner until Twins closer Matt Capps walked Miguel Olivo with one out in the ninth. Jack Cust grounded Capps' next pitch to third baseman Danny Valencia, whose decision to throw to second base was saved by an out call by Jerry Meals.

Mariners manager Eric Wedge's protest yielded nothing except an ejection, and Capps' next pitch sawed off Adam Kennedy, yielding a soft bounce out to second base to end it.

Numbers game

6: Members of the Target Field grounds crew who lifted home plate and slipped a black-and-white photo of Killebrew underneath, where it will stay for the rest of the season.

10: Strikeouts in 16 at-bats (62.5%) since returning from the disabled list for Delmon Young, who was benched on Tuesday in favor of Ben Revere.

Health watch

- C Joe Mauer (bilateral leg weakness) joined DH Jim Thome (minor back strain) and IF Tsuyoshi Nishioka (fractured fibula) in Fort Myers, Fla., to continue his rehabilitation work.
- OF Jason Repko (strained right quad) was 2-for-5 with a home run in his first rehab game at Class-AAA Rochester.

On deck

The Twins open another two-game series on Wednesday (9:05 p.m., 1500 ESPN Twin Cities) against right-hander Brandon McCarthy (1-4, 3.34) and the Oakland Athletics, who entered Tuesday's games one game back in the American League West Division.

A 17th-round pick by the Chicago White Sox in 2002, McCarthy is back after a third stress fracture in his throwing shoulder had him playing Class-AAA ball in the Texas Rangers organization and considering retirement last year. He signed a \$1 million deal in December, adjusted his arm slot to lower the release from his 6-foot-8 frame and has five quality starts in eight outings this season.

McCarthy is 1-0 with a 1.63 ERA and 15 strikeouts in 27 2/3 career innings against the Twins, who will counter with Carl Pavano (2-4, 5.89). The veteran right-hander threw 115 pitches, walked three and struck out only one in 5 2/3 scoreless innings on Friday against Toronto. He's 3-0 with a 2.57 ERA and 11 strikeouts in 28 career innings against Oakland.

Coming up

- Thursday: at Oakland, 2:35 p.m. RHP Nick Blackburn (2-4, 3.70) vs. RHP Tyson Ross (3-2, 2.50).
- Friday: at Arizona, 8:40 p.m. LHP Brian Duensing (2-3, 4.61) vs. TBD.
- Saturday: at Arizona, 9:10 p.m. RHP Scott Baker (2-3, 3.99) vs. TBD.