

Issue Date: April 2007, Posted On: 4/2/2007

The Natural

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Minnesota Twins young baseball phenom and hometown hero **Joe Mauer** plays by all the rules.

Minnesota Twins baseball legend Tony Oliva, a career .304 hitter and former American League batting champion, is walking through the current squad's clubhouse a few hours before a game. A reporter stops Oliva, now a part-time coach and Minnesota's latest batting champion-- young star Joe Mauer, who led the American League with a .347 average in 2006.

"Joe Mauer? He's no good. Why do you want to write about him?" Oliva asks, waving his arms in the air with mock disbelief. "Why don't you write about somebody with a question mark? You write about Joe Mauer, what are you going to say about him?"

Actually, when it comes to Mauer, a young man so revered in his home state of Minnesota that grown men and women have strapped fake sideburns to the sides of their skulls to emulate the most-talked-about facial hair in the Midwest, there's plenty to say: American League All-Star and batting champion, christened an "American Idol" in a 2006 cover feature by Sports Illustrated, dated Miss USA 2005 Chelsea Cooley É and that's just what he did in 2006. Because ever since he was swinging a plastic bat in diapers, growing up in St. Paul, Mauer has been an unreal talent - no matter what the activity - whose legend seems to grow with each passing season.

Mauer, who will turn 24 on April 19, is hiding on this particular afternoon inside the Twins' weight room, which is off-limits to the constant media throng that seeks to chronicle his every move. He seems embarrassed by all the praise heaped upon his young shoulders.

"I like to play behind the scenes a little bit," he says, shrugging. "All the attention [I'm getting] is because the team is doing well."

The 6-5, 220-pound Mauer is every bit Minnesota Nice, preferring to deflect praise and stay out of the public eye. But that gets rather difficult when you're one of baseball's rising stars, catching for your hometown team and doing one national media story after another because you're so good, so young, so fast.

"All the attention I get playing here can be overwhelming at times," Mauer says of the Twin Cities. "[But] the positives outweigh the negatives. I get to have my grandparents at every game, and my parents come to a lot of home games."

"It's got to be tough for him," says Twins teammate and Gold Glove center fielder Torii Hunter. "Because if you're from the Twin Cities, and you're doing what he's doing É everybody in town who thinks they know Joe Mauer [is asking]: 'Joe, could you do this? Could you do that?' They're dragging him this way and that way. What happens when we win the World Series? Everybody already thinks they know him, and if we win it all, even the people who didn't know him are going to know him. He's going to be the Michael Jordan of Minneapolis."

MVP on Aisle 7

Mauer, who shared his three-story, two-bedroom St. Paul town house with teammate and 2006 American League MVP Justin Morneau this past season, admits he has trouble going out in public these days.

"You still have to do certain things, like buying groceries," he says. "But yeah, it's getting tough."

For instance, Morneau, 25, and Mauer used to go into grocery stores together. Now, however, Mauer has become so popular, he waits outside in the car while Morneau does the shopping for both of them. There's just one problem: With Morneau winning the MVP award after a breakout 2006 season, his cover has been blown, too. The tall Canadian slugger explained to reporters this past fall how fans were chanting "M-V-P! M-V-P!" when he moved down the grocery aisles during September and October.

That probably means the pair, who often patronized a Jimmy John's sandwich shop near their home for pre- and post-game eats, probably won't have much luck staying incognito in 2007. Morneau is moving out this season; this winter, the first baseman built a town house of his own.

Mauer remains a homebody by design. He and Morneau spent many nights after 2006 home games in their basement munching pizza from local Italian restaurant Davanni's and watching movies on Mauer's 60-inch TV.

Miss USA and the Sideburns

Mauer won't go into detail about his relationship with beauty queen Cooley, saying only that they stopped dating in November 2006 and remain good friends - and that he's heading into spring officially single.

"It's a situation where Joe doesn't like to be in the spotlight, and he tries to keep things like that under wraps," says Twins closer Joe Nathan, himself an All-Star performer. "Joe tries to keep his private life private."

Privacy, though, can be a tough thing to maintain when even your sideburns are news. On August 10, 2006, the Twins presented "Joe Mauer Sideburn Night," giving away 10,000 pairs of synthetic-hair sideburns with double-sided tape, enabling fans to share Mauer's trademark look.

"I don't know what the big deal is about the sideburns," Mauer says, looking - for him, anyway - a bit exasperated over the issue. "I've had them for a few years, and they just kind of caught on this year I guess. It was pretty funny seeing older women putting them on, or seeing these dark sideburns on the faces of people who have lighter hair."

The Legend Begins

Spend any amount of time researching Joe Mauer's life, and a pattern quickly develops: Everybody has a Joe Mauer story. They start in early childhood, when Joe grew up as the youngest of Jake and Teresa Mauer's three sons. His two older brothers, Jake Jr. and Billy, relate how Joe's talent routinely forced him to move up and play with kids four to five years his senior in athletic leagues. In second grade, Joe was the starting point guard on Billy's fifth-grade basketball team. By fifth grade, Joe was the starting point guard on the eighth-grade basketball team, and so on.

"On the playground ... you could always tell," says Jake, 28, who was taken by the Twins 678th overall in the 2001 first-year player draft, when his then-18-year-old brother was drafted No. 1 by Minnesota straight out of high school. Injuries eventually forced Jake to close the book on his playing days; he's now a coach in Minnesota's minor league system. Billy Mauer, 26, was a pitcher in the Twins' minor league system before an arm injury ended his career.

"With Joe, by the time he was in sixth grade, he was dominating the eighth-graders too," Jake continues. "You could kind of tell that he was going to be something special." In their youth, great athletes tend to "hit a wall" at some point, as their peers catch up to them, Jake says. "With Joe, he never hit a wall. He kept adapting and making adjustments. Joe's always been a step ahead of everybody else."

High School Hero

Joe Mauer was also several steps ahead of the field during his time at St. Paul's Cretin-Derham Hall High School, which boasts a storied athletic program that has turned out the likes of former Twins player and Hall of Fame infielder Paul Molitor and current and former NFL quarterbacks Chris Weinke and Steve Walsh, among others. In baseball, he struck out exactly once in his high school career, hit .605 his senior year and set a Minnesota high school record by homering in seven consecutive games.

In basketball, Mauer was a two-time all-state selection. In football, he quarterbacked Cretin-Derham to two consecutive state championship games and won numerous national High School Player of the Year awards as a senior. He signed a football tender with perennial powerhouse Florida State University, and many NFL pundits believe he would have won a Heisman Trophy and been a top-five NFL draft pick had he played college football. FSU Coach Bobby Bowden was so infatuated with Mauer's talent that he promised to keep a scholarship handy during his tenure in case Mauer changed his mind or baseball didn't work out.

"Someday I'll be sitting on the porch with my grandkids and be able to tell them that, other than Joe Mauer, I might be the best player to ever come out of Cretin," Molitor told the St. Paul Pioneer Press newspaper in May 2006.

Adds Oliva, who has been around baseball for five decades: "Joe Mauer - a guy like him comes along maybe once every 20 or 30 years."

In a League of His Own

Mauer's magic isn't limited to the games he knows. During Spring Training 2006, Mauer went bowling with teammates. In his first game, he rolled a 265. "How very Mauer of him," Twins teammate Nick Punto said at the time.

"Oh, I guess I got lucky," Mauer says, rolling his eyes. "I got a new ball that night, and the guys were teaching me how to throw it. Hey, I haven't bowled a 265 since."

Nobody knows Joe better than his oldest brother, but Jake Mauer is left speechless when asked to name something Joe does poorly.

"Gosh, well, actually É OK, I have a story, but I guess it isn't really about him being bad [at anything]," Jake says. "We're out playing golf during Spring Training a few years ago in Florida. It's Billy, Joe, myself and a friend of ours. For one hole, we decide we'll all play the hole with our opposite hand. Joe is a left-handed golfer, so he has to swing right-handed. The rest of us are right-handed - we use Joe's clubs and swing left-handed. We all take our swings É Billy's is terrible, our buddy's is terrible, my shot goes about two feet and sideways. Joe gets up there, swings right-handed and booms it right down the middle like he's been doing it forever.

"Unbelievable. I just [said], 'Get back in the cart; Let's go.' And he sits back in the cart like he expected it to go right down the middle," Jake says. "There's something about my brother, with everything he does, he never seems to be out of his element."

That includes dodging and deflecting questions from an ever-growing media presence. Mauer swats away questions about his personal life or chances to pat himself on the back almost as easily as he hits line drives all over the baseball diamond. And he does it all with a patient smile.

"Everything that everybody says about him is the truth," Twins teammate and fellow catcher Mike Redmond says of Mauer. "He's a great player, a great teammate, an amazing guy. Always polite, always respectful. A lot of times, people talk about guys and they're really not that way. But he's one of those guys who truly is as good a guy as everybody says [he is]."

Avoiding attention for a moment, Mauer slips back toward the sanctity of the weight room. But before he can get there, a local radio personality chases him down, a pen and baseball in hand. Crossing the invisible line into players' private turf inside a Major League clubhouse is usually grounds for a tongue-lashing, temper tantrum or worse from players. But Mauer only sighs for the briefest of moments. He signs the ball, forces a smile and then does something that's becoming harder and harder these days - he slips out of the spotlight and goes back to the business at hand.

Minneapolis author John Nemo released a new baseball novel in March, "The King's Game," which is available in bookstores and at johnnemobooks.com.