

THE CHILL OF THE NIGHT seeps through the door of the Cleveland hotel where Albert Belle, the Indians' slugging outfielder, is expected to arrive any moment. A hotel guest sitting on a couch in the lobby gasps, "You're waiting for Albert Belle?" and fakes a look of fright. "Hide the women—and especially the children!"

Reputations die hard—very hard in the case of Belle, who certainly does nothing to help alter the perception of his controversy-soaked persona. On the field, he followed a terrific 1994 season—.357, 36

However, therein lies the paradox. Yes, Belle is an intense, emotional individual, but his hard-bitten competitive personality softens dramatically in the offseason (the Halloween incident notwithstanding). He smiles during the offseason. He laughs. He expresses a sincere and gentlemanly side that would make some reporters pass out.

This is the Albert Belle few media members—and fans—get to know. And that's too bad.

As he dined on lobster at a corner table in the hotel steak house, Belle opened up to *INSIDE SPORTS*. He talked about his controversial behavior, about losing the American League MVP vote to the Boston Red Sox's Mo Vaughn, and about the Indians' free-agent signings of Jack McDowell and Julio Franco.

INSIDE SPORTS: In 1995, a year after hitting .357, you achieved one of the greatest seasons ever. What's next—the Triple Crown?

ALBERT BELLE: I don't know about that. I thought it would be tough to surpass what I did in '94, and I did except for my average. Now it's going to be tough to surpass what I did last year. But no matter how many home runs I hit, no matter how many runs I drive in, it's not as important as winning the World Series. I'd give up any personal accomplishment for that World Series ring.

IS: What does it mean to you to be the only 50-50 player ever?

AB: A lot. I didn't really think about it during the season, but now I've had a chance to sit back and think about it. All the great home run hitters, all the great batting champions, and I'm the only one to have done that? That amazes me. To put your name on a record like that is really gratifying. What surprises me is that I was on pace to do it [50-50] in '94, then I actually wind up doing it in '95.

IS: Are you surprised that Willie Mays, Mickey Mantle, or Hank Aaron never had a 50-50 season?

AB: Yeah, I am. They're among the best ever, so for me to do something they didn't do, in a shortened season no less—well, it's surprising. Especially since teams played me differently, a lot tougher [in '95], as far as positioning goes. That's why my average dropped from .357 to .317. Teams had more shifts on than ever, and pitchers pitched me a lot tougher.

IS: Does it bother you that if not for shortened seasons the past two years, you might

Ringling Loud and Clear

Cleveland Indians slugger Albert Belle isn't always polite—hell, he isn't always printable—but you always know where he stands

By RICK WEINBERG

home runs, and 101 RBIs in 106 games—with a record-setting '95. In 143 games Belle hit .317 with 50 homers, 126 RBIs, 121 runs, and 52 doubles, the first player ever to get 50 homers and 50 doubles in the same season. However, during the spotlight of the postseason, at a time when he could have enhanced an image that even some criminals wouldn't want to be saddled with, Belle not only refused to talk with the media but went ballistic, complete with an obscenity-laced tirade, when he saw a row of reporters sitting in his sanctuary—the Indians' dugout—during the World Series. Then, a few days after the conclusion of the Fall Classic, Belle jumped into his utility vehicle and chased a group of teenagers who had egged his home on Halloween, nearly running them down. (The parents of one of the youths subsequently sued Belle.)

Reputation? Well, locally and nationally, Belle's is as bad as bad can be.