



STEVE LEVIN

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to worry about going out to play, who we're facing, what pitcher, what he's got, what place we're in, what we need to do to win. There's no pressure now. All I have to do is relax, not think about baseball, get in shape. But once the season starts, that's it. There are millions of dollars on the line. There's a championship on the line. Tension builds, tempers will flare. I'm more intense—I just want to prepare for the game and not be distracted.

IS: Why are you so intense and so determined to follow a strict schedule during the season? Are you afraid of failing?

AB: When I get ready for a game, I feel I have to be completely prepared, 100%. When you bat cleanup and play left field like I do, you're going to be involved in the outcome of every game. So I feel if I'm not prepared, I'd be neglecting my responsibility to the team.

Suppose I don't take batting practice one day because of an interview and don't feel comfortable at the plate and go 0-for-4? Maybe if I had been better prepared, if I had taken BP and gotten my swing down and produced, maybe that one run I drive in wins us the ball game, and I don't let the team down. It's important to me to know that my teammates know they can always count on me to be there.

IS: Let's discuss your playoff performance: .239, with just four homers and eight RBIs. What happened?

AB: I was designated as the one guy that

everyone said, "Don't let him beat you." Basically, the Red Sox, Mariners, and Braves all went in saying, "Make [batters] one through three or five through nine beat us. Not Belle." So I was pitched carefully, pitched tough, and pitched around. As far as the Braves pitchers go, I think a pitcher always has the advantage over a hitter when they're facing each other for the first time. Scouting reports are great and watching a video can help, but until you get into the batter's box and get a feel, they have the advantage. The Braves pitchers had great advantage. Next time I'll know what to expect.

IS: The Braves handcuffed you—you basically didn't pull a ball the entire World Series. How frustrating was it?

AB: Very frustrating. I had one ground ball to short and one to third, and everything else was to right field, including the two homers. When I watched the Braves pitchers on video against the Reds, they were getting calls three to six inches off the plate, especially Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine. The catcher sets up two or three inches off the plate, and if the pitcher throws it right there he's going to get the call damn near every time. The scouting report says they won't ever give in, no matter if the count is 2-0 or 3-1; they stay right on the corner, and the umps always give it to them. We were so far up on the plate that if we'd gotten any closer, we would've been in the other batter's box.

We knew they weren't going to put the ball where the meat of our bat was. They would have gotten killed. If we play the Braves again in the World Series, we'll have a great idea how to beat them—and we will.

IS: The Braves called the Indians arrogant and cocky. Did that bother you?

AB: I couldn't care less what the Braves say or think, or anyone else for that matter. We're a very loosey-goosey team, a very confident team. If people perceive us as cocky, fine. It works to our advantage. If teams are more worried about the way we present ourselves while we're beating their brains out, fine.

IS: Does the prospect of being in the World Series again this year temper the pain of losing last year's Series?

AB: There was no pain about losing the Series. Getting to the Series is the tough part; winning it is the next step. We had the

best record in the major leagues in the season, and there was only one team better than us in the playoffs. We don't have anything to be ashamed of, nothing to hang our heads about.

IS: Having signed McDowell and Franco, are the Indians unbeatable now?

AB: As close to unbeatable as you can get. McDowell's a bulldog, a winner. When he's out there, you know he's going to be throwing everything he's got. You've basically got to drag him off the mound to get him out of a game, because he wants to be out there.

IS: And Franco?

AB: When I played against him, I felt he was one of the great RBI men in baseball. I can't believe the other teams gave up the opening to grab him. I mean, doesn't anyone else need a great RBI man? The White Sox could certainly use a bat like Franco's behind Frank Thomas. All we did was lead the league in runs, and then we go out and get another 100-RBI man? What are the fans thinking in other cities where they need another bat? We were the last team that needed a bat, and we got one of the best. The most intimidating lineup in baseball just got more intimidating.

I'd hate to be a pitcher having to face us. You're going to get your brains beaten in. ■

RICK WEINBERG enjoyed interviewing Albert Belle so much that he didn't even mind having to travel from his home in Southern California to frigid Cleveland for the session.