

The Superstar

Nobody Knows

Barry Bonds may be the best baseball player alive, but he realizes that no matter how badly he wants it, he'll never be another Michael Jordan

By RICK WEINBERG

BARRY BONDS SITS SILENTLY IN his agent's office. The room is decorated with baseball memorabilia, but the San Francisco Giants' slugger ignores it; he's huddled over his laptop computer, staring intently at the screen. Suddenly, his shoulders jolt back and his piercing eyes light up, just as they do when he zeroes in on a fat, belt-high fastball.

"Hey, man, check this out!" he says loudly, pointing to the screen. "Republic Industries is splitting shares. That's Wayne Huizenga's company. You know, the guy who owns the Marlins, Dolphins, Panthers, Blockbuster Video—just about everything in Florida, man. This Republic Industries, this is *the bomb!* Gary Sheffield [of the Marlins] was just talking about this the other day. He's been giving away some of his shares of this. Man, I gotta get me a few."

Bonds, the only player in major league history to cop three most valuable player awards in a four-year span, stretches back in his chair, his hands behind his neck. He's wearing a grin that often appears when he arrives at the top of the Giants dugout after hammering one into the seats. Bonds is into computers, the Internet, and stocks just like he's into scouting reports of National League pitchers.

Bonds' girlfriend, Liz Watson, smiles and shakes her head. "I think he's getting to like computers more than me."

Not quite, Liz, but Bonds certainly is digging his new hobby, the Worldwide Web. "Now I can read all the baseball columns," he says, giggling. "I can check out all the trade rumors, all the gossip. Hey, I can read *your* story on the Net—to see if you dogged me or not."

Is this playfully engaging and humorous guy really Barry Bonds? "This is the Barry Bonds no one really gets to see," says his agent, Dennis Gilbert. "The Barry Bonds you're seeing today is the one I wish everyone knew. They'd have a completely different perspective of him."

True. As Bonds sits in Gilbert's black leather swivel chair, he reveals a seldom-seen side. He's surprisingly candid, honest, expressive. "This," he says at the outset of the interview, "might be the only time I open myself up like this." Over the next few hours, Bonds talks about a fierce anger that nearly prompted him to quit, his conscious effort lately to be nicer to the press, his ugly ongoing feud with umpire Paul Runge, his obsession to become the first player in history to hit 400 home runs and steal 400 bases, and why he feels jilted for not being as popular as Michael Jordan.

INSIDE SPORTS: You're finishing your 11th season in the major leagues. Can you believe your career is going by so quickly?

BARRY BONDS: No, I can't. Sometimes it seems like yesterday that it all began, that I was in Pittsburgh playing for Jim

Leyland. Then again, sometimes it feels like I've been in the major leagues forever. There's been a lot of highs, a lot of lows. There's been a lot of great moments, and a few moments when I just wanted to hide.

IS: Are you a better hitter today than at any time in your career?

BB: No, I'm not any better than I was in '91 or '93 or at any other time. I actually feel I'm the same: no better, no worse. Hitting comes with a lot of luck—the way you're pitched to, who's hitting in front of you, behind you, things like that. Putting up big numbers is sometimes the result of the people around you.

IS: Don't you learn more about yourself and your hitting capabilities every year? Don't you learn how to handle certain pitchers?

BB: There's really nothing new I learn about myself as a hitter because I know myself already inside and out, backward and forward, as a hitter. The only thing I have to do now is to know new pitchers—what they throw, how they work the big hitters. I also still analyze pitchers who give me the biggest challenges, the Greg Madduxes, the Tom Glavines. The thing is not to overdo it, not to fill your mind up with too much information, because that's how you can put yourself in a hole.

IS: What do you do to prepare for a pitcher you've never seen?

BB: Watch film of his most recent start—what he throws, what his best pitch is, what he throws to the 3, 4, and 5 hitters. If