One of the things that separates you from Michael, Magic, Montana, all these legends you've mentioned, is that they have won titles and you haven't. How much of a factor is that?

None. Ken Griffey Jr. ain't won one MVP or one championship, and look at the way he's viewed vs. the way I am. They've got him running for president. No, I believe the difference between me and those other guys is they came up without having to be compared with anyone, but I came up being compared to a lot of people. I remember hitting three home runs in a game a few years ago, and the first reporter said something like, "Well, your cousin Reggie Jackson hit three homers in one World Series game." That took out all the enjoyment for me. But I handled the media all wrong back then. I had handled the media like Michael and Magic, things may have turned out different. I should have taken things more humorously. But I was always focused on getting respect, on people calling me Bobby instead of Barry.

Did the anger you carried, and all the negative press, make you a better player?

It did. All that pain I had, I inflicted on the baseball. And I inflicted three MVPs worth of it. And I still inflict it. Every time I go on the field I have that little bit of that pain in the back of my head. But I recognize it and deal with it better. That's why I'm a lot nicer now, a lot easier to talk with. People can flip me off now and I'm like, "Cool, brother. What's up?" This one guy in the stands screamed, "You know, Barry, the Giants suck!" And I turned and said, "Shhhhh. Not so loud." I have fun with it now; before, I couldn't. I'm secure with myself, my place in baseball history.

At the All-Star Game this year, Eric Young's locker was next to mine, and he told me, "You know Barry, people are wrong about you. You're really a cool dude." I told him, "Eric, if you met me two or three years ago you wouldn't have liked me, because I wouldn't have liked you." Now I try to like everyone. I may not be the same player because I don't have all that pain anymore. It's not as easy for me to play now—I don't get headaches anymore, I don't feel like I want to quit, I don't feel like fighting anymore.

Now that you've become a more likable guy, do you think you'll start to be viewed like Jordan, or that you'll start getting some major endorsements like Jordan and Griffey?

Nope. Once you've been stamped, that's it. Certain players can have a bad-boy image and it can work for them—Charles Barkley for one, Dennis Rodman for another. They make millions from being bad boys. The worse Rodman is, the more money he makes, because that's society.

I told Albert Belle this season that he needs to have some balance with his image. Rodman throws his jersey to fans after every game. I told Albert he should give a bat away after every game. That way you can still have a bad-boy image, but show your nice side at the same time. I told him he could make a bundle.

Did Belle say he'd take your advice?

Nah, he growled something like, "It wouldn't matter."

Tony Gwynn raves about your ability to hit any pitch anywhere, in or outside the strike zone, anywhere on the field. What makes you such a gifted hitter?