

Stan 'The Man' Musial

It truly was a wonderful life

First and always, there was that stance. Hips cocked, the bat held absurdly high over the left shoulder, uncoiling then in a split blink of a eye, lashing a baseball into the gap. No way you'd teach a kid to hit like Stan Musial did. No way he could. But why then did generations of kids in this town grow up trying to hit like Stan the Man?

He'd come a little closer and you'd hear the laugh, the giggle, the "Whadayasay, whadayasay," the jokes that were always on him. You'd talk a little bit and never hear a boastful word from him, this guy who was one of the half-dozen or so best hitters ever to play Major League Baseball. Is this guy for real?

Yeah, he was. And he was that good. He was that humble. He defined his team for 22 years as a player and 40 years after that as a senior statesman. When they say St. Louis is a baseball town, it's because Stan Musial played here and stayed here. If you paid attention, Stan Musial taught you how to treat other people.

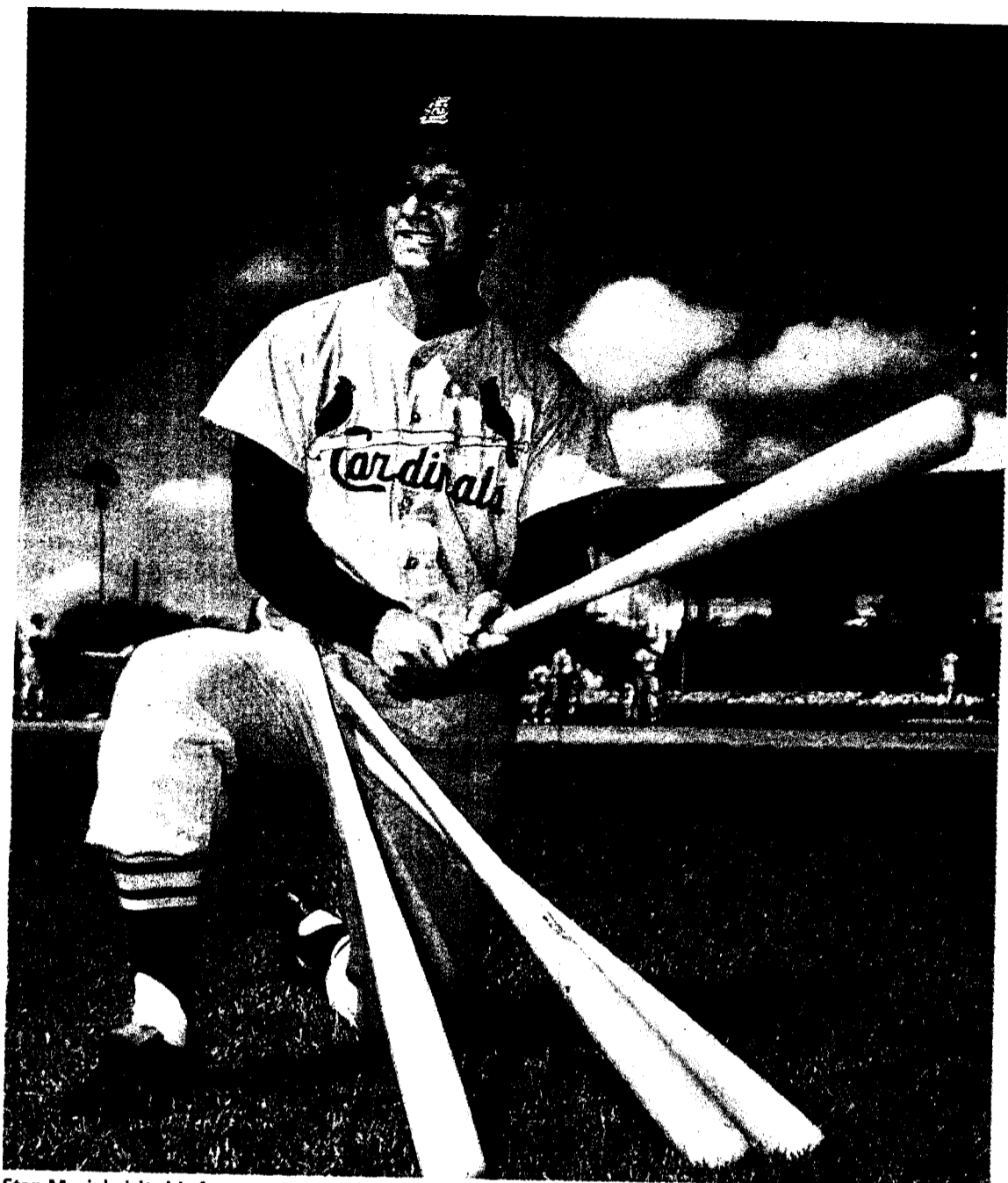
Odd how it came as a surprise Saturday evening when word came that Stan had died. He was 92 and had been in awful health, but still it was a surprise.

In theory, we knew the day would come when Stan Musial would die. Nobody lives forever, not even Stan the Man. The late Post-Dispatch sports editor Bob Broeg, who was his close friend, liked to talk about one of the first road trips the Cardinals took by airplane in the 1950s. The prop plane was bouncing around in a terrible thunderstorm. Everyone but Stan was retching and praying. "I can see the headline," Stan told BB. "Cards' plane crashes. Musial lone survivor."

Stan knew he was a lucky guy. He didn't worry about things, except in '59 when he had his stroke and it darned near drove him crazy. At the end of the season he tried to give the Cardinals some of their money back.

In the offseason, you could go down to Cardinal Lanes on Gravois Road in those days, bowl a few lines and rub shoulders with Stan. You could go to Stan and Biggie's Restaurant on Oakland Avenue, and he'd be there with a "Whadayasay, whadayasay." A kid — or as the years went by, a grown-up — would ask him for an autograph, and he'd reach into his suit pocket and pull out a color photograph, Stan in his crazy stance, and sign it with a Blue Sharpie. Didn't cost \$75 either.

If you're among those who knew him only by his records, or as the elderly gent in a red sport coat in a golf cart on Opening Day, you missed something really special. It is



Stan Musial visits his former teammates at the St. Louis Cardinals spring training baseball camp in Florida in March 1964 following his retirement the previous autumn. ASSOCIATED PRESS

a cliché to say at times like this that we will not see this man's likes again. But we won't. And that makes us profoundly sad. And deeply grateful for the life he gave us.

— St. Louis Post-Dispatch

An amazing ballplayer — and so much more

Maybe it is right that Stan Musial, after a long and happy life, passed away while the sports news is so strange and disagreeable. Here, one of the most famous athletes in the world admits to Oprah that he cheated and bullied his way to the top. There, one of the happiest college football stories of the year talks about being duped, and how the girlfriend who had inspired him to do great things never existed.

The sports pages overflow with cynicism and bitterness and anger. Maybe it is an especially good time to look back and remember Stan Musial.

Every single day, when Stan Musial left the house, he would tuck his harmonica into his pocket. Every single day, at some point, he would run

into someone, and he would pull out that harmonica, and he would play "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." It made people smile.

Everyone was in awe of him — teammates, opponents, fans. In Chicago one year, the fans actually voted Stan Musial their favorite player ... over all of their own Cubs. In New York, one year, they had a Stan Musial Day. And the umpires. Oh, the umpires loved him. He never got thrown out of a game.

A man came up and told me this story. He said he did not know Musial. He said he was in a restaurant with his wife and daughter. And he saw Musial across the way. He had wanted to go over and say something, but he decided against it. He was celebrating his daughter's birthday.

The man said that at some point, the waiter brought out a little cupcake with a candle in it. And then, all of a sudden, Stan Musial was at the table. He brought out his harmonica. And he played "Happy Birthday." The girl found herself utterly delighted. The father, of course, felt his eyes well up with tears. I know this be-

cause even as he told the story, tears welled up in the eyes of the father.

You could argue that Stan Musial should be better remembered as a ballplayer. You would be right. Only two men, Babe Ruth and Barry Bonds, created more runs than he did. Only Hank Aaron totaled more bases. Only Tris Speaker and Pete Rose hit more doubles.

He wasn't a drunk, and he wasn't a jerk, and he wasn't especially quotable. He was, instead, someone who enjoyed seeing people smile. What a life. He married his high school sweetheart, Lillian, back in 1940.

Maybe there have been a handful of better ballplayers. Maybe there have been a handful of more important baseball players. But no baseball player, none, worked so hard to make people happy. He hit the ball hard into the gaps, ran hard out of the box, signed every autograph, shook every hand and turned dollar bills into memories. And, all the while, he kept telling us that he was the lucky one.

— Joe Posnanski,
joeposnanski.blogspot.com/