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## Baseball means everything to Drago



Dick Drago, holding a ball from his first major league victory against the Angels in 1969, had his best year in the majors in 1971, posting a 17-11 record with the Kansas City Royals. (SPECIAL TO THE BLADE)

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*In Their Words* is a weekly feature appearing Sundays in *The Blade's* sports section. *Blade* sports writer Steve Junga spoke with Dick Drago, a Toledo native who pitched in the major leagues.

Nearly 25 years after his major league pitching career ended, Toledo native Dick Drago hasn't forgotten how much baseball meant in his life.

It was his first real job after signing with the Detroit Tigers in 1964, and it led him to a key role 11 years later in arguably the greatest World Series game ever played. Although he missed the game's big-dollar contracts by a few years, baseball provided Drago a healthy financial reward for doing something he loved for more than 17 pro seasons.

Richard Anthony Drago, who celebrates his 61st birthday today, now resides in Tampa, Fla. Instead of hurling fastballs, sliders and change-ups, these days he spends weekdays trading stocks from his home computer,

supplementing his \$4,200 monthly major league pension.

For the 1963 Woodward High School graduate it all began — like it does with many youngsters — playing catch with his dad. Anthony Drago recognized the pitching talent of his son before he was 10 years old.

Anthony coached his son in organized youth leagues for six years, beginning with the Whittier Aces when Dick was a 10-year-old in Toledo's Pee Wee Reese division. By the time he was striking out scores of batters for the Woodward varsity, Drago had drawn attention from various major league scouts. He passed on some initial offers after graduation, and accepted a scholarship offer from the University of Detroit.

Restless to compete again (college freshman weren't eligible to play in that era), he signed a pro contract in '64. He turned down several offers, the largest from the Boston Red Sox (\$30,000), and inked an \$18,000 bonus deal with his beloved Detroit Tigers.

There was a steady rise through the minors — instructional league in '64, Class-A Daytona Beach in '65, higher Class-A Rocky Mount in '66, Double-A Montgomery in '67 and back home to the Triple-A Mud Hens for an International League pennant-winning season in 1968.

But — on the heels of a 15-win season in Toledo and apparently on the brink of reaching his dream of playing for the Tigers — Drago was spurned when Detroit, fresh off its World Series win over St. Louis in 1968, left him unprotected for the expansion draft that fall. Drago was selected by the Kansas City Royals, and in 1969 began a 13-year major league career, one of the longest ever by a Toledo native.

Drago's big-league run ended like it started, with an expansion franchise (the four-year-old Seattle Mariners), and again outside of his control. He was released at the end of spring training in 1982

With a career record of 108-117 and 3.62 ERA, the financial peak came in 1978 when Drago signed a three-year \$450,000 contract with Boston. The highlights included a 17-11 record with the Royals in 1971, a season in which he was fifth in the American League Cy Young voting, and his stint as a closer with the Red Sox in 1975.

With Boston trailing three games to two against the powerhouse Cincinnati Reds in the World Series, Drago pitched scoreless ninth, 10th and 11th innings in between Bernie Carbo's clutch three-run homer which tied the game 6-6 in the bottom of the eighth and Carlton Fisk's equally dramatic game-winner off Fenway Park's left field foul pole in the 12th.

It was Drago who served up Joe Morgan's 11th-inning blast to right, a ball that appeared destined to become a two-run homer before Boston's Dwight Evans made a spectacular leaping catch and turned it into a double play.

Drago, twice divorced, has three grown children — son Darren, 35, and daughter Dina, 31, from his first marriage, and son Justin, 26, from the second.

After trying his hand at several nonbaseball business ventures after retirement, Drago is currently content to trade his stocks, collect his pension and follow the baseball season.

"MY DAD WAS the one who took me over to the park to play catch all the time to build up my arm strength. One thing he emphasized was throwing strikes. If I threw it to where he couldn't catch it, he made me go and chase it. So, I learned to throw strikes. He also worked with me on my windup and delivery, and he made sure I took care of my arm.

"HIGH SCHOOL WAS a fun time, especially being an athlete. Baseball wasn't a big deal back then, not like football and basketball. But I had a lot of fun playing and we had a real good group of guys. I developed some real good friendships. Those years growing up were great years.

"THE RED SOX offered me the most, but I just wanted to play for the Tigers so bad. That was my team. Al Kaline was my hero. That was the team my dad followed.

"THE YEAR I made it to the Mud Hens, that was cool. It was fun being back in my hometown with my parents, my family and my friends. We had a lot of good pitchers on that team — Les Cain, Mike Marshall, Jim Rooker, Tom Timmerman and myself, and had a good team. It was nice to be winning and in your hometown.

"I WAS PLAYING winter ball in Puerto Rico when I found out I was going to Kansas City. I was shocked and disappointed. All I ever wanted to do was pitch for the Tigers. I was heartbroken. At that time, I didn't even know where Kansas City was.

"I didn't know why [Detroit] didn't protect me. I almost made the Tigers for the '68 season. I was the last pitcher cut. They just won the World Series, so I think they thought they had a dynasty. They protected all of their older players."

"WHEN I WENT to Kansas City, I fell in love with that city. It was a beautiful place, and it was a bunch of new guys starting a whole new team. It really didn't feel like you were on a big-league team, other than you were traveling and playing big-league teams.

"[On May 2] they needed an extra starter for a doubleheader and I had my first [major league] start in Anaheim against the Angels. I threw a nine-inning complete game and won 3-2. I was just a fill-in and it was the first complete game by a Royal pitcher. I still have the ball next to my [home] computer."

"I DON'T THINK anybody knew at the time what impact [Game 6 in '75] would have on baseball. It seemed to change the interest and increase the popularity of the game.

"It was pressure. You find out how you handle it. You either thrive or you collapse. I was warming up in the bullpen and I was going in in the ninth inning either way. All of a sudden [with Carbo's homer], it's a tie game. I was standing on that warm-up mound watching that ball go out. I had to get my game face on real quick. I was thinking, 'I better get my act together; this is serious now.'

“I remember jumping up and down on Fisk at home plate. That [finish] is what you dream about when you’re 10 years old. I would have loved to have won that series, and we had a great chance. Usually nobody remembers who lost, but everybody still talks about that one.”

“BASEBALL GAVE ME everything that I have now. It was an opportunity to do something I loved and get paid for it. It gave me a chance to provide for my family. Now it takes care of me for the rest of my life.

“I HAVEN’T BEEN back to Toledo since my dad died [in 1999]. I’d like to get back one of these days.”

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