

# Reno Bertoia

## Tiger by Day, Student by Night

by Shelley Divinich Haggert, Issue #15, May 2001

What Little League player in Windsor hasn't dreamt of playing Tiger ball? The vision of stepping up to the plate at the corner of Michigan and Trumbell has been replaced by the dream of Comerica Park, but it's still the same dream – Windsor boy makes the big time.

Reno Bertoia did just that.

Born in Italy in 1935, Reno's family took up residence in Canada when he was 22 months old. Like all immigrants, the Bertoias came in search of a better life. Reno's father worked at Ford Motor Company, and the family settled on Hickory Road.

Reno first started playing ball in the neighbourhood – the schoolyards, vacant lots and parks of East Windsor. His role model was next-door neighbour Hank Biasotti, who had played major league ball for the Philadelphia Athletics.

Reno followed a similar path – Gordon McGregor School, Assumption College, and then the major leagues. He started following the Tigers when he was a young newsboy, and the Tigers won the 1945 World Series when he was 10.

From the diamonds at Stodgell Park to Class –'D' ball at Northwestern Field in Detroit, under the supervision of Father Ronald Cullen (who still coaches past the age of 80), Reno moved toward the ultimate – his 1953 signing with the Detroit Tigers

An eighteen year-old 'bonus baby,' Reno was luckier than most. His initial contract included not only his signing bonus and salary, but also a trip to Italy for his mother and a commitment from the Tigers to pay for his university education. His 1954 Topps card lists him as the only Italian-born player in the major leagues.

In August of 1953, Reno was voted Most Outstanding Prospect in the City of Detroit, and sent to play in the Hearst All-Star game in New York City. He'd also been given a baseball scholarship to the University of Michigan. After New York, John McHale, general manager for the Tigers pursued him, and offered Reno his first major-league contract.

For the kid from a small Canadian town, the major leagues were a culture shock. Most of the Canadian players at the time were pitchers – there were few fielders. In fact, in 1958, Reno was the only Canadian in

an opening day lineup. The pressure was the worst of it – but Reno was hardest on himself. "I worried too much," Reno said candidly in his interview for this story.

Required to forfeit his scholarship to U of M, Reno continued his education at Assumption University in between ball games. Friends would forward class notes for him during spring training, and he'd play second base by day, and write exams at night.

Reno's parents were proud of his accomplishments – his dad would often be found in the stands at Tiger Stadium. Reno's mother watched while he faced the illustrious Satchel Paige in his first game at Tiger Stadium. He got spiked at second base and she never attended another game.

Reno's major league career didn't end with the Tigers. Over the next ten years, he would play for the Washington Senators (later the Minnesota Twins) and Kansas City (now the Oakland A's) and back to Detroit. It was easier, he says, to play for the distant teams. "There was less pressure. At home, everyone wanted to know what you were doing, how you were playing," he recalled. "I was always afraid of disappointing somebody."

Reno's fondest memories of the game involve the people and players he met. He shared the game with some of baseball's greats – Ted Williams, Satchel Paige. For five years he roomed with Al Kaline, and recently reconnected with Kaline at spring training in Florida.

After leaving the major leagues, Reno settled in Windsor to raise his family. "Windsor was home – it never really occurred to me to go anywhere else." The teaching career that had started as a winter job in 1958 continued for 30 years at Corpus Christi,

Assumption and Holy Names. Reno also spent time scouting for the Tigers and Blue Jays after his retirement from professional play.

Reno agrees that baseball has changed – not just the economics, but the caliber of play. "If you look at the stats now, these are big players – most of them over six feet. But there are some darn good players."

Reno likes Comerica Park, and enjoys going to games. The Tigers have been good to him, he says, but he has no airs about his major league career. "I had my fifteen minutes of fame."

Reno Bertoia was inducted into the Canadian Baseball hall of Fame in 1988.



Reno at bat, circa 1950's