

A collector's paradise in Aptos

By TIM FISETTE

Although they are avid baseball fans who attend "about 30 or 40 A's games a year," Jim and Steve Bunner of Aptos were never ones to get too excited about those ever-popular give-away days, where the management hands out free bats, balls, caps, etc. to young fans. Oh, it's not that the two teenagers don't care much about collecting such memorabilia — in fact, it's quite the opposite. But one look at their bedroom will make it obvious why those freebie days don't interest the Bunnars very much.

The first thing that catches your eye is the bulging bat racks in the corner. Atop the wooden cases sits a long, colorful row of the batting helmets for every team in the major leagues. Several worn, pinetarc-covered batting gloves are also strewn on top of the rack. Numerous baseball posters and pennants hide most of the walls and between the beds is a set of shelves stuffed with some 130 ("but we gave a lot away") baseballs. Indeed, the room more resembles a wing at Cooperstown or a major league clubhouse than it does a bedroom. You almost expect a gruff, cigar-chomping equipment manager to come striding in and inform you that no visitors are allowed in the clubhouse.

But for 17-year-old Jim — a junior at Aptos High and pitcher for the Mariners — and his 18-year-old brother Steve — a 1980 graduate and third baseman last year — the numerous mementos are merely a result of several years of indulging in their favorite hobby.

"We started when we were just little kids," said Steve. "But we never really thought it would get this big. Somebody may have a bigger collection somewhere, but I've never seen it."

Neither have I. It seems as if the only person who could have a shot at gathering such a collection would be a bat boy, or maybe some guy who works in an Adirondack factory.

The bat assemblage is the most impressive part of the room. There are 72 bats in all, each one a gift from major leaguers, from Willie Mays to Rod Carew. Most of the sticks have hairline cracks on the handle, making them of no use to the players, but some are in perfect shape. And one can tell a lot about the particular habits and hitting styles of the various ballplayers by the clubs they prefer to use.

For example, when taking a few swings with Rod Carew's thin-handled, super-light bat, it's obvious why he's the consistent slap-hitter he is, whose numerous seeing-eye singles have won him seven batting titles over the years. Then there's the monster-sized bats of folks like Steve Garvey, Manny Sanguillen and Don Baylor. For the average person, swinging one of those things at full speed is challenging enough, and the thought of getting it around in time to effectively smack a 90 mile-per-hour fastball is awe-inspiring. No wonder Garvey's arms look like those of a world-class powerlifter. In fact, the Garvey bat rates as Steve's personal favorite.

"I was at a Giants-Dodgers game and I went up behind the Dodger dugout and asked Garvey if I could have a bat if he cracked it," said Steve. "He said, sure, no problem. After he took his swings during batting practice he walked back to where I was standing, and he was holding the bat up to his face, inspecting the handle like he cracked it somewhere. Then he said, 'Well, this one's not cracked, but you can have it anyway.' It was great."

As for Jim, he prefers the autographed Fred Lynn bat, which was another unexpected gift. "I was talking to Johnny Pesky (Red Sox hitting coach) before the game and Lynn just came up to us and tossed it to me and then autographed it. That's why it's my favorite."

How can these two teenagers just get bats handed to them all the time? After all, it's hard enough to get an autograph from some of the

players, let alone a bat.

"The key to the whole thing is to be polite," said Jim. "We just ask them before batting practice if we can have a bat if they crack one. They're usually great about it. And if they've seen you around before that helps a lot too."

Of course, knowing somebody in the trade doesn't hurt either, and for the Bunnars, their buddy on the inside is Wes Stock, former A's pitching coach, now with the Seattle Mariners. Jim met Stock back in '76 when the coach accidentally bumped into him while warming-up his ace lefthander, Vida Blue, before the game. The two started talking baseball, and soon became pals. Ever since, Stock has unloaded countless free tickets, balls and bats on the Bunnars, as well as allowing them in the clubhouse and dugout after the game. Even though Stock is in Seattle now, they still keep in touch. They even went up and visited him a few years ago and then got the thrill of a lifetime by playing pepper with some of the Mariners before a game in the Kingdome.

The Bunnars' acquaintances aren't limited to a few players and coaches, though, as Jim recalls the time he was the personal guest of that cantankerous, controversial team owner, Charles O. Finley.

"I was standing outside the player's entrance before a game," said Jim. "And he pulled up in his limo and asked me if I'd like to be his guest up in his owner's box. I guess he'd seen me with Wes before. He got me lunch and everything, and he even asked my advice on getting

some help from the free agent market."

It was at this time that Bunner found that although Finley may have his generous side — although you probably wouldn't find an A's player or coach to admit it — he's pretty frugal when it comes to forking out the big bucks for the superstars.

"I told him he should go after Dave Parker," (the Pirates rightfielder and self-proclaimed best player in baseball). "Finley said, 'Why should I pay a million dollars for one player when I can get three or four for that price. It's just not worth it and I won't pay it.'"

But when the Bunnars weren't guests of coaches or owners, or the recipients of gifts from the players, they simply had to go out and compete with the rest of the fans for bats and balls. Most of the 130 baseballs they have were tracked down in the Coliseum after being fouled-off.

"The key is to sit along the foul lines," said Steve. "And if you get there before batting practice, the bleachers are the place to be. They usually have guys shagging the balls during batting practice, but one time Wes came up and told us we could have all the balls we got. We grabbed 16 that day, and also got three bats. You should have seen me walking out of the Coliseum after the game with all that stuff under my jacket. I looked like Lou Ferrigno."

And anyone who's risked life and limb at a pro baseball game by recklessly zig-zagging through the seats with 20 other crazed fans in

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Baseball buffs Steve Bunner (left) and his brother Jim show off their collection of diamond memorabilia.

Photo by Kurt Ellison

pursuit of a foul ball knows that some guys will do anything to get their hands on the prize. Let alone a bat.

"Once after a game when the Coliseum was almost completely empty, I was walking out with a bat and some big guy came up to me and told me to give it up, or else. He started coming towards me so I took off and ran all the way across the stadium. I thought I'd have to use the bat for a while there."

But most of their experiences while obtaining artifacts have been pleasant ones, as the Bunnors have found that most major leaguers aren't the spoiled prima donnas they're often made out to be.

"Most of the guys are super," said Steve. "They're just normal people and they're usually nice as long as you are. You wouldn't believe how rude some of the fans are. They just shove their paper and pen in the players' faces. I saw Reggie Jackson get poked below the eye with a pen once. There's a few snobs in the major leagues, but most are all right."

The reason for their dogged determination in getting all these mementos?

Well, we're just big fans," said Jim. "All this stuff means something to us. And of course, my dream is to have my name on one of those bats some day."

And if Bunner does find his way into the big leagues and some wide-eyed kid comes up to him and asks him for a bat or a ball, you can bet he'll be all too happy to oblige, having been there before.