THE SECRET LIFE OF ROCKY PERONE

This is Richard Pohle as he looks today at the age of 40.

The author tells the story of one Richard Pohle, who at 36 felt he could still play ball well enough to make it to the majors. Knowing that no team would take a chance on a rookie that old, Pohle, with the help of a friend, hit on a scheme to step backward in time

BY ELIOT ASINOF

Pohle re-creates his role as 21-year-old Rocky Perone.

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It was the greatest feeling in the world—or maybe the worst. Five years ago, there I was in a San Diego uniform about to take a pregame workout with the Padres. Warming up on the sidelines were the champion Cincinnati Reds—Pete Rose, Joe Morgan, Johnny Bench, those guys. This was the big time. This was where I belonged. Nobody ever wanted to be anywhere more than I wanted to be in this spot.

The trouble was, it wasn't me. Or, to be more exact, nobody knew it was me. The guy on the field was known as Rocky Perone, supposedly a 21-year-old rookie from Sydney, Australia. At least, that's who the Padres thought they had signed. Actually, my name is Richard Pohle, and I'm from Lisbon Falls, Maine. And my age, by God, was 36!

Except for Satchel Paige, I probably was the oldest rookie ever signed to a professional baseball contract. But look, at 36 I was desperate. I *had* to do something. I wasn't some rinky-dink from Pipe Dream City. Over the years, I'd proved myself repeatedly. I had to prove myself again just to be here. I'd had to show them something. The hoax about my age was just a device to get the scouts to look at me, to *really* look at me. Can anyone picture a scout giving a tryout to an American shortstop who is 36?

God knows the number of places I'd gone for tryouts, how many times I'd hitched to spring-training camps, traveling from Maine to Florida or from California to Florida, and how close I'd come to making it years ago. The trouble with scouts is that they seldom believe what they see. What they *want* to see is some big rangy kid with a sensational high school rep, a .575 hitter with power, someone destined for a big bonus, someone about whom the scout can tell the front office what it wants to hear. But who was Richard Pohle? Just some dumb kid from Maine, a little guy who was already 18 and no one had ever heard of him. They can really cut a man down. Year after year, I kept coming back for another shot, and then I would end up playing ball in Canada, Mexico, Japan, Cape Cod. It seemed like I was never more than a month or two away from the opening of a season. I even went to England, Sweden and Australia. Name places where anyone plays decent ball, and I've been there.

When I reached the age of 36, I was living with my sister in Huntington Beach, Calif., which is about an hour's drive from Los Angeles. I guess I'd been beaten down too many times, and it was beginning to show in the mirror. I had wrinkles around my eyes, a heavy black beard, not too much hair on top, and more than a trace of gray around the temples. If a scout saw me now, he'd push me into a rocking chair. I was washed up before I'd even been given a real chance.

Well, almost.

I had this friend back in Lisbon Falls named Richard Lister. As kids, we'd played a lot of ball together. Now he was a clinical psychologist in Costa Mesa, a few miles away from my sister's house. He'd become something of a miracle worker, you might say, helping people to become successful. He had this theory that age was an exaggerated bugaboo, that there were athletes who could perform way beyond the normally accepted limits. Most of them, when they reached 35 or so, would begin to quit on themselves; they believed their talents were decaying because that was the way the baseball Establishment laid it down. Like Maury Wills. When he was closing in on 40, he was still a better shortstop than the 24-year-old guy, Bill Russell, who took his job away. But you couldn't get a sportswriter to write that.

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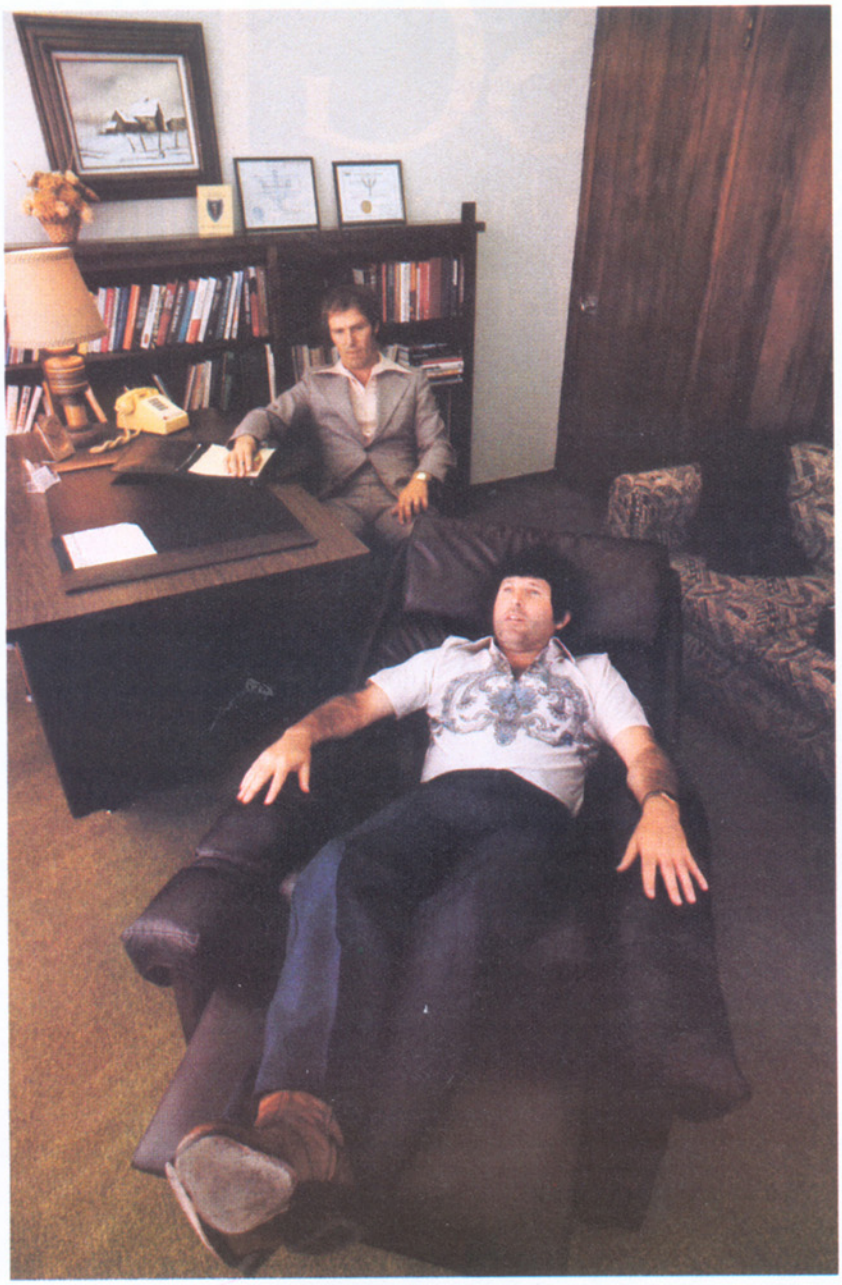
Skin creams gave Pohle's face a youthful glow that he was careful not to let the sun destroy.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL EPPRIDGE



Put under hypnosis by Psychologist Lister, Pohle was persuaded he could play a rookie's role.

I remember that Doc Lister and I were once in a locker room when a guy came in for a tryout, and right away the scout asked, "How old are you?" The guy blanched a little and said, "I'm 26." Right away the scout waved him off. "Twenty-six! You want me to get fired?" It was the sort of thing that could turn an honest man into a liar.

"I'm a better ballplayer at 36 than I was at 21," I told Lister one day, "but it doesn't do me any good." The Doc was staring into his coffee, the wheels in that big brain of his spinning, and when he looked back up at me, suddenly everything was different. I saw that look and I knew what he was thinking, because I was thinking the exact same thing myself: The name of the game is 21.

I could knock off 15 years and become a new man with a new identity, new looks, the works. Wow! I liked the idea, but it scared me right out of my shoes.

"You can do it, Rich," Doc said.

"Sure thing," I said as if I meant it.

Then he said something about how he could make a racehorse out of a jackass if the jackass had the right attitude.

"I'm no jackass," I said.

"Then you're halfway home," he assured me.

So he went to work on me. First thing, he wanted to hypnotize me.

"What!"

"Trust me," he said.

I did. I always had. I mean, I really felt I was lucky to have him on my side. The point is, I'm not the most stable guy in the world. I grew up in grubby New England factory towns. My mother and father divorced when I was five. I never got along with my stepfather. Our home was full of hard drinkers and fighters; we never had enough money, and there were always plenty of squabbling siblings. I was always getting into scrapes. I wasn't the model child, you might say. The only reason I held together at all was baseball. Since I was 10, I knew I could play ball. And because of baseball, Lister, who is two years older and much bigger than I, became my best friend. We played sandlot ball together as kids.

And because he's my friend and such a talented specialist, now he could really help me. He got me to relax. "Start by relaxing your right leg. Fine . . . fine. I want you to listen carefully to what I say. . . ."

I would drift off the way he wanted me to. He would take me back in time, from 36 to 25 to 17 to. . . . We gradually rehashed what my life was like through all those years—how I'd been repeatedly thwarted, how close I'd come to making it. To give me confidence, he constantly emphasized how I deserved to make it. Like when I was 10, I had my first glove, a Phil Rizzuto model. I didn't even know who Phil Rizzuto was, but I learned how to use that glove quickly enough. Owning that glove changed everything. I was small and I played shortstop, as I found Rizzuto did. I was the little guy with his hands close to the ground. I learned to get those hands on everything that came near me. I was good. Right off, I was ready for my first tryout. I wanted to play Little League but because there was none in the New Hampshire town where I was living at the time, my cousin and I hitchhiked 40 miles to Nashua. It turned out we were a day early for the tryouts, but we weren't about to go home. No, sir, I was going to make that team. We decided to spend the night in the ball park, finding shelter in the press box and curl-

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ing up in corners for warmth. But my cousin didn't sleep too well. He got restless and cold, and around three in the morning he accidentally kicked a switch and suddenly the scoreboard lit up. The next thing we knew, the cops came for us, and just to keep us out of trouble, they let us spend the night in jail.

I never got that tryout, I never played Little League ball, but I did get a solid thrashing from my mom.

You may think, so what? But as Lister said, suppose I had made the club. Suppose I'd played great ball as a kid and showed everyone how good I was. A 10-year-old phenom, right? Who knows? Wouldn't that have been an important beginning?

Confidence. Lister kept building up my confidence. He knew I was sensitive about being only 5′ 7″, but he kept telling me how it wasn't that important. "Think of Rizzuto," he said. "Think of Freddie Patek. You're only 5′ 7″, but every inch is loaded with dynamite. The only thing that matters is that you're good!"

O.K., I knew that. I'd always known that. I'd proved it enough times. Seventeen years ago, both the Dodgers and the Kansas City A's wanted to sign me, and when Arthur Lilly, a scout for the A's, offered me a contract and a spot on the roster at Class D Daytona Beach, I accepted. I was set to start my professional career. But I got the flu and ran a 104° temperature; I had to go into the hospital. I almost died! I lost 16 pounds, and when I got out, I was too weak. The A's knew I could play ball, but they had to release me. They didn't have the funds to hold me, they said. So I had to go back to my sister in California a failure. I remember how I arrived at the bus station at two in the morning with my Kansas City A's travel bag and walked eight miles to her home, and when I saw her, I broke into tears.

"It wasn't your fault," Doc kept saying to me. "The breaks went against you. You have to believe you can make it in spite of the breaks. You can, Rich. You're good enough so you can."

Every day that winter we worked out. There is a lot of good baseball played around Los Angeles in the winter. You could put together a first-rate semipro team from the gang that hangs around Sawtelle Park, for instance. Lister was my coach and trainer as well as my shrink. He had me running my butt off. Hit, field, throw, bunt, slide. And I had to play like a kid. Dumb, not cocky. I had to tone down my savvy. Like a kid, for example, I'd pull the bill of my cap over my eyes so that I had to raise my head to see. I even had to change my jargon because kids have new ways of saying things. They no longer say that a fastball pitcher throws "aspirin tablets" or "BBs"; they say, "He throws heat" or "He brings it." And the old superstitions—like the one about not crossing bats—well, kids don't care about those sorts of things anymore. If I went around uncrossing bats, it would tend to give away my age, Lister said.

This went on for weeks, a combination of field workouts and hypnosis, body and mind, all of me conditioned into a whole new person. A couple of times, Doc even pulled me aside and put me under light hypnosis right on the ball field, because he thought I was dogging it.

Meanwhile, with my sister's help, I learned how to work on my face. I made a study of cosmetic creams and powders. I visited beauty parlors and cosmetic specialists. I got facials and massages and mudpacks. I used Essence of Youth, Dermassage, baby oils—even butter—trying to make myself look more youthful. Because I have a heavy black beard, I figured out how to shave close without cutting up my skin, first working in hot soap and cream to open up the pores. It would take me at least 25 minutes to shave, but my skin would end up as smooth as a baby's butt. Then I'd pat tinted baby powder on my cheeks to cover the pores.

On top, I got fixed up with a rug that was styled sort of the way Pete Rose wears his hair. I learned how to dye the exposed hair beneath it with a mixture that would leave it dark and shining.

I was careful about what I ate. Mostly I stuck with fruits and vegetables. I got lots of sleep. It helped that I had never smoked or drunk, not even beer. And I kept my face out of the sun as much as possible, protecting my skin with creams whenever I played.

They say that the mirror doesn't lie, but when I got through working on my face, I wasn't so sure about that. Thirty-six? No, sir, I looked young. I mean, the guy named Rocky Perone looked so young, he could almost fool Richard Pohle's sister.

Finally it was January and time to take the test. Because too many baseball people knew me in California, my best shot would be in Florida, where most of the training camps were located. We had gotten a copy of the *Baseball Blue Book* that contains the names of all the scouts. Lister had the idea that some of the scouts would be more approachable than others. With a good pair of binoculars, he showed me how to check out a scout, to get to know something about him, to see how he was feeling, to determine if he was in the mood to pay attention that day. "Stay away from the guys who look stupid or bored," he'd say, "but most of all, stay away from the really smart ones."

Everything depended on the scout. He was the man I had to fool and impress. And as we came close to the showdown, I became doubly worried about how to make my mark. The problem was, how do I get a guy hot for me even *before* he sees me?

Every aspiring kid knows the problem: You get invited to a camp, but you're only one of 500 players. They put a number on your back, and somebody raps a few grounders to you. You get half a dozen cuts at pitches thrown by a machine. Then, even if you're a vacuum cleaner with those ground balls, even if you show you've got a rifle for an arm, and even if you jerk three balls out of the park, chances are all they'll do is to put a check by your number and then forget about it.

I wanted no more of that. It wasn't going to be enough just to be 21. I could scout those scouts for a dozen years, but even if I caught the right one and impressed him with my new youth and old talent, he'd be sure to ask me where I was from, where I played high school ball, how come there was no book on me. And if I made up something, he would do a little telephoning just to check me out. He would have to be suspicious as hell. So the guy named Rocky Perone had to be a complete unknown. There needed to be a good reason why no scout had ever heard of him.

Doc agreed that no matter what scout I approached, smart or dumb, I had to

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have an explanation. Then the old light bulb went on in my head. It was so perfect I burst out laughing.

Rocky Perone was from Australia. He was 21, a phenom from Sydney, where, though most Americans don't know it, they play some fairly good ball. Because I'd spent several years down there, the territory was familiar. I began practicing my accent. Best of all, there would be no way for anyone to check me out. Right, mate?

Lister insisted I go to St. Petersburg by bus, the better to make my adjustment slowly. Besides, I'd be staying in character. A poor kid doesn't take a plane or drive a car. I could practice meeting strangers, get the feel of acting like an Aussie.

So I was back in St. Pete again, and right off there were painful memories of earlier failures. I was hardly out of the bus station when I thought of my first trip South at 18, toting my glove, spikes and an old uniform with WORUMBO INDIANS across the shirt. I had a few dollars for survival, but a wealth of high hopes. I lived on Baby Ruth bars, slept on the beach and tried to talk my way into the Yankee and Cardinal training camps to show them my stuff. Then one night a storm blew in off the Gulf, and my only shelter was under a kids' slide in the playground. The next thing I knew, a cop had me booked for vagrancy—my second night in jail. When I got out, I picked up my gear at the beach, only to find it soaked. The shoes, glove and uniform were all ruined. What's more, at the ball park I was told that insurance regulations prevented me from working out. Only contract ballplayers were permitted on the field.

Well, 18 years and a thousand games later, here I was again. I checked into a hotel and opened the *Baseball Blue Book* Lister and I had studied so carefully. Having just heard that the Pirates were looking for infielders, I called their office in Bradenton.

"My name is Dick Kerns," I said, using a deep voice and my regular New England accent. "I'm in the import-export business, just returned from Australia." I explained that I'd been a minor league ballplayer some years before and knew what I was talking about, so when I tipped them off, they listened. "I saw an Australian kid, name of Rocky Perone. I'm telling you, he's amazing. Hit, run, throw, wow. Small, a lot like Bobby Richardson. He's here in St. Pete. Wants to go to school, he says, but you really ought to take a good look at him."

"How old is he?" Always that question.

"Twenty, 21," I said.

It worked. They invited Perone for a tryout.

The next day I arrived dressed like a real busher—torn pants, old sweat shirt, Aussie spikes with white laces, even a Dutch Boy painter's hat. Everyone laughed at me. Let them. Any distraction from the truth had to be a plus. Even my dumb Aussie routine was a laugh. When I saw the metal doughnut used to weight the bat for on-deck hitters, I asked, "What's that, mate?" Nor could I understand some of the jargon. "You've got good range, Aussie," Danny Murtaugh said. " 'Range,' mate?" I said. I showed them my good hands and teed off on John Candelaria, who threw straight stuff to me. "Didn't know Aussies played anything but cricket," Murtaugh said, obviously impressed.

I left quickly, without taking a shower. Whenever possible, I stayed with this policy. The way I saw it, I'd add 10 years to my appearance when I took off my uniform. They gave me $50 for transportation and asked me to come back in a few days.

Then Dick Kerns tried the Cardinals, speaking with Coach George Kissel, and again it worked. But Kissel was too damn smart. After hitting me some grounders, he said suspiciously, "You've been around, son. You've played a whole lot of baseball." He even spotted my New England accent, despite all the Aussie phrases. And that night, when Kerns called him to find out what he thought of Perone, Kissel replied that Perone couldn't be 21 and that he doubted he was Australian. "He even chews his gum right!" Kissel said.

I immediately vowed not to chew gum again—and to stay clear of smart coaches like George Kissel.

The next day I learned that Jim Marshall, a scout for the San Diego Padres, was in town, though they trained in the West. Dick Kerns persuaded him to check out a young infielder from Australia.

When Marshall came to pick me up, I sensed there was going to be trouble. He had a woman in his car and a kid in the back seat. I was afraid that the woman would see through the phony age ploy, so I wanted to sit with the kid. But Marshall moved her so he could talk directly to me as he drove. The kid kept grabbing at my Dutch Boy cap, once coming close to knocking off my hairpiece. I was so nervous by the time we got to the University of South Florida in Tampa, I was sweating blood.

Then I got on the field and in 15 minutes everything changed. It was like in the movies when some slob comes off the street into a fancy nightclub and sings like Mario Lanza. They hit me ground balls, and I dug them out as though I owned the ball park. I covered the ground like I was on skates. Then I hit clotheslines to all fields and from both sides of the plate. I gave them such a show that the college kids not only stopped laughing at my rube appearance, but they also stopped practicing to watch. I was so hot that I told myself to be careful or Marshall would smell a rat. So when he told me to lay a few down, I asked him what that meant.

"Bunt," he said. "Let's see you bunt."

Richard Pohle can bunt like Ty Cobb, but Rocky Perone looked like a bum. And sure enough, it made everything else seem right.

"I heard you came to the States for an education," the college coach said as he pulled me aside.

"That's right, mate," I said.

"Well, why don't you consider coming here?" We'll take care of you, son. Everything you need.

Marshall took me to dinner and told me he was convinced I was a big league prospect, that he was going to call Robert Fontaine, director of player personnel for the Padres. "I don't know, mate," I conned him. "I came here to get an education."

"You can always get an education, Rocky," Marshall said. "I'm giving you a chance to play pro ball. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

And sure enough, Marshall appeared the next day with a contract in hand. If this was a movie, great music would be soaring in the background. It didn't mat-

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ter that I was to report to Walla Walla, Wash., a Padre farm club, or that I'd be getting a lousy $500 a month with an incentive bonus if I stayed through the season. I didn't care about such trivia. What mattered was that this was a professional baseball players contract and that I was signing it.

So it was that the big day came in San Diego when I was asked to work out with the Padres before a game with the Reds. Like I said, I wasn't feeling too sure of myself. Lister tried to reassure me. "Enjoy it," he said. "Remember, you're a kid playing with the big boys for the first time. It's a thrill, Rich, a great big thrill!"

It was a thrill, all right. As I walked out of the tunnel into the sunlight and onto the field, my heart was pumping furiously. It was a beautiful sight. I'll never forget that first moment. I was 36 pretending to be 21, but I felt like 16.

Because my knees were shaking, I turned to Lister, who was standing behind the dugout. He made a fist and nodded in encouragement. My throat was as dry as a bone, and I didn't feel at all at ease. I stared at him, half wondering if he could hypnotize me right then and there.

Then Second Baseman Glenn Beckert called out to me. "Catch, Aussie?"

I collected my wits. " 'Catch,' mate?" I asked as though I didn't know what he meant.

He pounded a ball in his glove and made a throwing gesture. I nodded, and we warmed up together. Beckert was an old pro, formerly a star with the Cubs, who was now past his prime. I thought, I'll bet I'm older than he is! (I was, by two years.)

Then I was on the field during batting practice, and someone was fungoing ground balls to me between pitches. I made all the moves, but I wasn't really there. I couldn't seem to handle the ball right. Over the years, I'd made thousands of throws right on the money. Suddenly I couldn't. It kept crossing my mind that someone was going to recognize me. After all, a player's moves are his signature. Then I was called in to hit, and I grabbed a few bats. Someone told me to use a particular one. I got in the cage and started knocking the ball when Derrel Thomas, the Padres' shortstop, rushed over and grabbed the bat I was using. Instinctively, I wouldn't let him have it. "Nobody uses my bat!" he hollered. Lots of ballplayers are sensitive about that, I knew. I heard laughter behind the cage and realized I'd been set up. I took another bat, but my hitting wasn't the same. I barely made contact with the next few pitches and got angry at myself. Then I got even angrier at the pitcher when he didn't throw strikes. I couldn't get it all together. When the game began, I didn't even shower. I grabbed my clothes and met Lister, and we blew out of San Diego like a pair of thieves.

"You were pretty sad, Rich," he snapped at me. "You lost your cool. I

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had the glasses on you. You looked like you were itching for trouble."

"I guess I was scared," I said.

"Worse. You were quitting on yourself."

We drove in silence. I thought: Was it true? Was a part of me hoping to be discovered *before* I had the chance to play a professional game?

Lister kept working on me. "Damn it, Rich," he said, "you've come all this way. You're right on the brink of pulling it off. I can't go to Walla Walla with you. You've got to handle yourself, and that means keeping in control."

I had another week or so to mull it over, which didn't make things easier. My head kept spinning with fears that I wouldn't look young enough, or that they wouldn't believe I was an Australian, or that someone was going to recognize me. Lister kept building me up, saying, "You're taking these risks because you really don't have any choice. You're doing it this way because they won't let you play ball at 36 even though you've proved that you're good enough. Remember that, Rich." He put me under hypnosis for the last time. "You're a helluva ballplayer, Rich. Nothing else matters but that. You're going to be playing ball, and what could be more fun than that? Think of that, Rich. Think of the pleasures of playing ball."

The trouble with being in Walla Walla was that playing was only a small part of being on the club. I had to live with my teammates. I even had a roomie, a fellow named Bill deLorimier. I had to hide all my face creams and powders. I had to shave three times a day without being seen. I had to dress and shower in secret so no one would see my body. I had to be on my toes every minute. And I still had to make the ball club.

Right off, the wig was a problem. It was 98° in Walla Walla, and my hair dye started running beneath my batting helmet. What's more, I couldn't take the helmet off, even when I went out to play the infield. It had two earflaps, because I hit from both sides of the plate, and it fit so snugly that my wig was apt to move when I took it off. "Always wore it in Australia, mate," I explained to the skipper. "Can't play ball without it."

The Aussie ploy continued to save me as an explanation for all my crazy behavior—like never mixing with the others, staying clear of the front office, even when it was time to pick up meal money. I had picked up a car which gave me mobility, and I'd drive 20 miles to eat in private. Luckily, my roomie was a scared rookie himself, and he didn't care if I locked myself in the bathroom for an hour or more. He was that happy to be left alone.

But how many times could I suit up in the locker room toilet before somebody started asking questions?

After three nerve-racking weeks, I was still around on opening day. They had a big bonus baby playing short, but I knew it was only because they'd spent so much dough on him, that it was only a question of time before I'd be the main man. I'd call Doc Lister and he'd build up my hopes. He wanted "no self-fulfilling prophesy of failure" from me. "You're going to make it, Rich!" he said.

My chance came on the first road game at Lewiston, Idaho. Unless it poured buckets or a bomb fell on the ball park, I was finally going to play my first professional ball game.

Then I saw the Lewiston skipper, a former big league second baseman named Bobby Hofman, and I remembered running into him a dozen years before in St. Petersburg. Would he remember me? I didn't look at him. I wasn't chewing gum. I kept my mouth shut.

"Batter up!" the ump barked.

After 18 years I could hardly keep from laughing. It didn't matter that this was a town in the boondocks; I was going to play pro ball. What I did would go into the record books. They wouldn't let me play when I was young, but I was going to show them something now. When I stepped to the plate, the P.A. man announced, "Now batting for the Padres, Rocky Perone." I got set, waved my bat, took the first pitch low and away, and I thought, by God, it's really happening!

I got a base on balls—officially, not even a time at bat. I took a big lead and watched the pitcher's motion. After walking me, he was cautious about his control, taking an extra second to look toward the plate after he checked me at first. On the second pitch, I ran and I beat the throw easily, sliding to make sure I'd be safe. I got to my feet, dusted myself off and then looked up at a light tower, feeling like a nightclub star under a single spotlight.

Ha ha to all you scouts who passed me by.

Ha ha to all you managers who never gave me a chance.

Ha ha to all you front-office big shots who would choke on your checkbooks if you knew I was 36.

And hello, Doc Lister, you marvelous crazy bastard.

We did it!

I got a hit the next time up. I made a putout and a couple of assists. I did fine. Trouble was, I could see Bobby Hofman staring at me during the entire game. I had the feeling he was on to me.

When the game was over, he approached me. "Don't I know you?" he asked. "Where the devil have I seen you before?"

"Can't say, mate," I replied, trying to avoid his eyes.

He shook his head but I could tell he wasn't going to quit on it.

Sure enough, the next day I was told to call the front office. In no time at all I knew it was all over for me. No explanations necessary, just a few sheepish questions like, "Say, how old *are* you, really?" and "Did you really play ball in Australia?"

"Goodby, mate," they said.

I should've been mad but I wasn't. I'd played a professional baseball game. I did what I'd set out to do. Years ago I'd crawled home from St. Pete to my father's house in Maine like a beaten dog, and later to my sister's in California. But not this time. This time I felt fine.

Well, that was five years ago. I'm almost 41 now. I've been over all this with Doc Lister often enough. We still work out a lot, play ball, tennis, run on the beach. He says I haven't aged at all. I agree. I mean, I feel great. I can still run like a deer and my hands are as sure as ever, and everyone knows a man can hit until he goes blind. I really believe I can still play ball with almost any rookie trying to break in.

The fact is, I'm so sure of it that I'm going to try again. Doc Lister agrees with me. We've got a new notion of how to pull it off, and this time I'm not going to get caught.

You'll see. **END**