

INSIDE BASEBALL

These players belong at the head of the class

By KEN DALEY

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It's hip to be old school.

Of course, being known as an old-school kind of player was a compliment long before the term was glamorized in a recent series of commercials for a cable network featuring sports reruns. Old-school players are the kind of guys who could have played anywhere, anytime, with anybody.

Old-school players wear scabs and scars, not gold chains and earrings. Old-school players don't leave batting gloves dangling fashionably from their pockets, if they even use them at all. Old-school players would rather taste a face full of dirt than finish a game with a clean uniform. They will take a fastball off the forearm if it means covering the outside corner, and they'll do it without wearing more body armor than a SWAT team.

Old-school pitchers won't hesitate to knock you off your feet if that's what it takes to push you off the plate. Old-school hitters understand that, and are secure and savvy enough not to charge the mound unnecessarily.

Old-school players never have to remind others how old-school they are.

"I just think 'old-school' is a guy that's not really very vocal, but leads by performance or example," said Cleveland Indians first baseman Jim Thome, who is as old-school as they come. "I don't call an old-school guy a guy who just pulls up his socks. He's a role model, on and off the field. A guy who respects the game and is a good person. I think that has a lot to do with it, too."

Old-school players can't think of anything they would rather be doing than playing baseball.

"I don't know if guys think it's ornery, but you have to have a passion for the game," Thome said. "If you can't have fun playing, then you should be doing something else."

Al Rosen, a member of the last Cleveland team to win a world championship in 1948 and a charter member of the old school, said Thome would have fit in on that club as well.

"He would have been one of our leaders," Rosen said. "There's absolutely no guile about him. He is a ballplayer and proud of it. "He looks like he plays for the love of the game. He plays with a pure enthusiasm you don't often see in today's athletes."

He plays like he's old school. For example, when he broke a bone in his right hand after being struck by a pitch Friday night, the club said he could miss up to six weeks and hoped to have him back in time for the playoffs. Thome, though, shrugged it off and said he hopes to play again by Sept. 10.

So, with admittedly subjective criteria in mind, we set out to choose our own All-Old School Team for 1998. It wasn't easy.

Some positions, such as first and third base, are rich in such players. Deserving candidates such as Mark McGwire, Mark Grace, Jeff Bagwell, Robin Ventura, Chipper Jones and Scott Rolan narrowly missed the cut.

Other positions were difficult to fill. Among left-handed pitchers, for example, Randy Johnson certainly is old-school on the field, but his histrionics off it this season made it difficult to consider him a complete old-school package. In the end, we opted for the cerebral determination of Tom Glavine. And the old-school physique and training methods of David Wells, who hasn't forgotten it's still a game and rarely forgets to have a cold one after one.

Not surprisingly, it takes time to earn old-school respect. Our selections average 33 years of age and 10 years in the big leagues. Only four players chosen are still in their 20s, the youngest being Anaheim's gritty Darin Erstad, 24.

Our choices for the All-Old-School team, throwback players whose attitude, approach, work ethic, respect for the game and overall comportment would allow them to fit in during any era. You could count the gold chains these guys wear on the field on one hand.

C — Joe Girardi, Yankees. Willingly teaches backup Jorge Posada to replace him. Second team: Charles Johnson, Los Angeles.

1B — Jim Thome, Cleveland. Ballplayer's ballplayer, for the sheer joy of it. Second team: Darin Erstad, Anaheim.

2B — Craig Biggio, Houston. Hard-nosed, beats opponents in variety of ways. Second team: Mark McLemore, Texas.

SS — Gary DiSarcina, Anaheim. One of the majors' most underappreciated players. Second team: Omar Vizquel, Cleveland.

3B — Matt Williams, Arizona.

No-nonsense personality; total professional. Second team: Cal Ripken, Baltimore.

LF — Rusty Greer, Texas. Can't imagine this hard worker doing anything else. Second team: Moises Alou, Houston.

CF — Marquis Grissom, Milwaukee. Has been teammates' best example in four cities. Second team: Steve Finley, San Diego.

RF — Tony Gwynn, San Diego. Eight-time batting champ respects game, everything around it. Second team: Jay Buhner, Seattle.

DH — Paul Molitor, Minnesota. Still showing how to take extra base at age 41. Second team: Edgar Martinez, Seattle.

RHP — Roger Clemens, Toronto. Defends his part of the plate with heart of a lion. Second team: David Cone, Yankees.

LHP — Tom Glavine, Atlanta. Brings talent, guile and searing determination. Second team: David Wells, Yankees.

RP — John Wetteland, Texas. Complex off the mound, but never any excuses on it. Second team: John Franco, Mets.