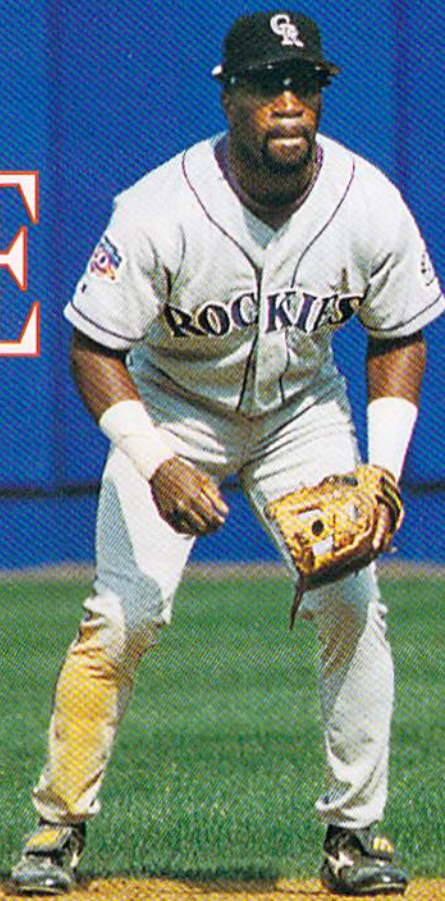




Everything:



LIFE



IN THE





Colorado Rockies manager Don Baylor has given Eric Orlando Young (LC'89), his 1996 All-Star second baseman and leadoff hitter, a 30th-birthday present—his first day off this season. For the player who hit .324 and led the National League in stolen bases last year, that means he doesn't have to take batting practice and he'll sit the game out on the bench. The last thing Young expects on his hard-won day off is to be ambushed in the locker room by his alumni magazine. Taken off guard, Young searches his locker in vain for a note about the appointment. All is not lost, however;

FAST LANE

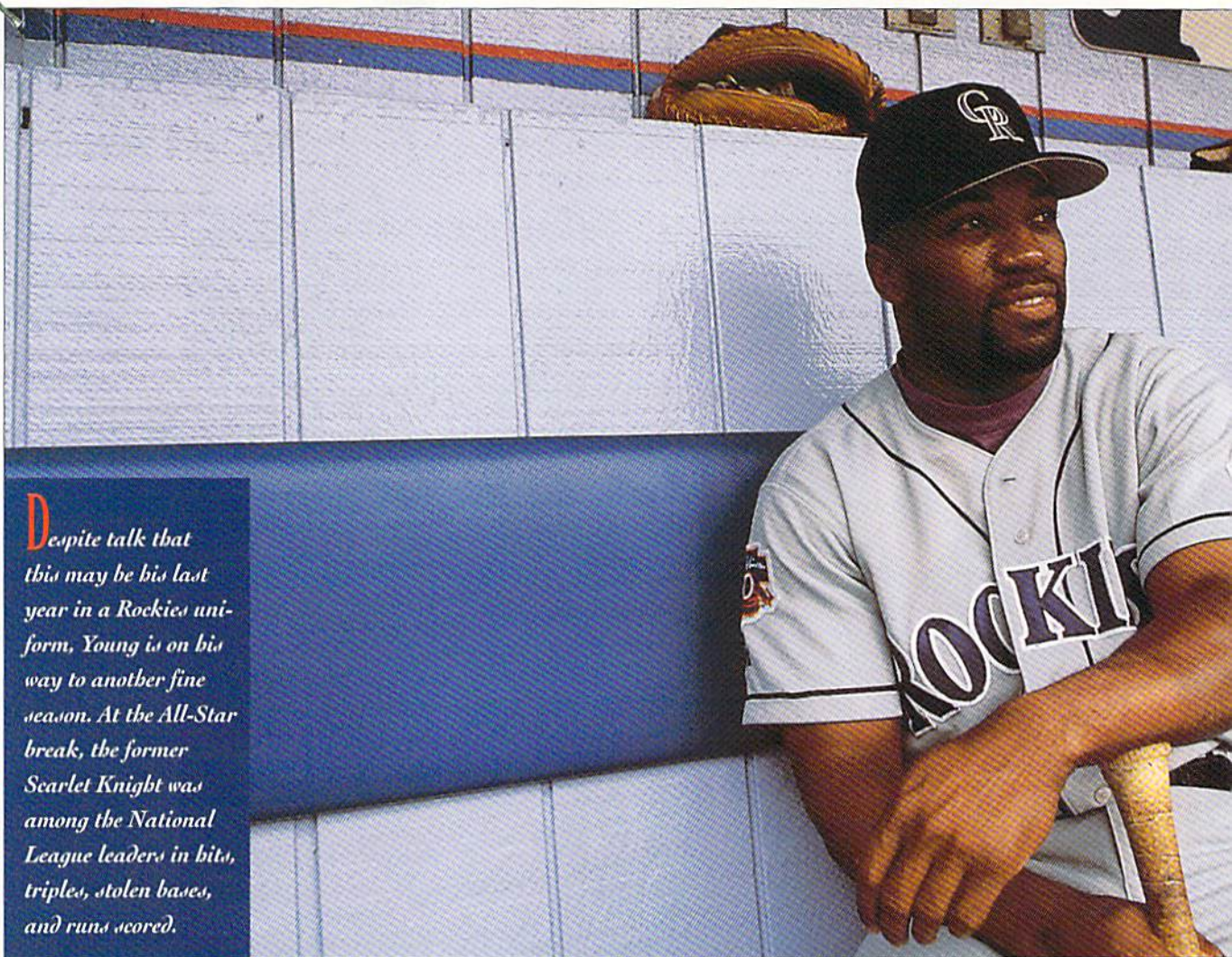

in fact, there isn't even a problem. Eric Young, confesses Eric Young, loves to talk.

Especially, it seems, when the conversation turns to his days at New Brunswick High School and his fond memories of his former teachers and coaches. "What did they say about me?" Young asks eagerly. "Did you talk to Mrs. K [teacher Joan Kuchinski]? To my football coach, John Parker? To Principal [Fred] Brown? Definitely go back and talk to them!" Although animated, Young speaks in soft, measured tones, and he never loses eye contact. His unexpected visitors can't help but feel flattered and charmed by his attention as Young spends an hour waxing poetic on his childhood in New Brunswick, the influences of high school and college

With his blazing speed on the base path, alumnus Eric Young has traveled far from the sandlots of his native New Brunswick—all the way to the major leagues.

BY BILL GLOVIN





Despite talk that this may be his last year in a Rockies uniform, Young is on his way to another fine season. At the All-Star break, the former Scarlet Knight was among the National League leaders in hits, triples, stolen bases, and runs scored.

teachers and coaches, and his life as a standout athlete.

Despite a 2-6 record on this road trip and the pressure on the always sold-out Rockies to make the playoffs again, Young is determined to enjoy his rare day of relaxation. After yesterday's game at Shea, he'd driven to East Orange for a birthday party thrown by his fiancée; tonight the team will fly to San Francisco for tomorrow's game against their division rivals, the Giants. To top it all off, 42 games into the season and on a quest to steal more bases than last year's record, he's scraped significant skin off his leg and is still recovering. He's hoping that today the Rockies will take a comfortable lead, enabling him to rest for the entire game.

But it's not meant to be. In the eighth inning, with the Rockies down 2-1, Baylor calls Young, who is batting .353, off the bench to pinch-hit. Young walks on four pitches, goes to third on a single, and is thrown out at the plate trying to score the tying run. But before the inning is over, Young has sparked the Rockies to take a 3-2 lead. He has been known as a catalyst ever since he first laced up his baseball spikes, football cleats, and basketball sneakers in and around the Robeson-Schwartz Homes in New Brunswick.

Selected for the National League's All-Star team in 1996, Young—at 5' 9" and 170 pounds—is not only one of the finest two-sport athletes in Rutgers' history, but also one of the few Rutgers athletes to shine in the professional ranks. "I don't think that many people thought that Eric, as great as he was in high school, would someday be playing major league baseball, much less as an All-Star," says Bob Miller, his baseball coach at New Brunswick High. "It's rare that someone his size makes it in professional sports."

His is a Cinderella story filled with ironic twists and turns and big moments: As a Scarlet Knight, he hit two home runs in his first two at bats. As a Colorado Rockie, he belted another in the first at bat ever in Denver's brand-new Coors Field. "It was an incredible moment that will be part of Rockies' folklore forever," says team spokesman John Cale.

Young, who has had a series of nicknames ("Little Bennie," "Energize," and "Mighty Might"), has come to be known in and around baseball as "EY." Quips Rockies' manager Baylor, "Ask EY a question and you should have enough to write a book." His manager's off-hand remark is consistent with Young's own assessment of his oratory



skills. "I've been told I have 'the gift of gab,' and I've considered sportscasting as a post-baseball career option," he says. "I think it's part of my being a very upbeat guy. If I see a teammate down or struggling, I'll always try to pick him up. I don't believe in doubting yourself or losing confidence. When I make an error, I always want the ball to come to me on the next pitch—I know I'll make the play the next time."

Young credits his parents for his work ethic and positive attitude. His mother, Lucille, was 20 when she and her husband, Otis, left southern Mississippi to find work in New Jersey. Eric is the youngest of four children, not counting Otis's nephew, Bernard, who came to live with the family at age 14. "I'm a little older than Eric," says Lester Voorhees, a childhood friend who is now the activities coordinator at New Brunswick High School. "Around the projects, we called him 'Little Bennie,' after his older cousin, also a fine athlete. EY could always stay in there with the older kids."

Otis Young worked long hours at High Grade Beverages in South Brunswick, but Lucille's job allowed her to attend Eric's Little League, high school, and college games—and she rarely missed one. "I told all my children that if they made the effort to make something of themselves, I'd be there for them," says Lucille, who organized busloads of community residents to see her son play on the Rockies' current road trip to New York and Philadelphia. "When kids would be carrying on and doing mischief, Eric would be doing his schoolwork or watching his favorite teams on TV. I don't remember ever having to give him a whuppin'."

A teenaged friend of the family, Angela Ford, took a fancy to him as a young boy, escorted him to parks and gymnasiums, and encouraged him to compete against older kids. Dana Brown, a high school teammate of Young who is now northeast scouting supervisor for the Pittsburgh Pirates, first saw Young play in Little League. "I played on the other side of town, but we all knew about this kid who already had a reputation as a great athlete and competitor."

When Young transferred from St. Peter's Prep to New Brunswick High School, he had already carved out a reputation in football and basketball: No one would ever have predicted for him a career as a major league baseball player, says high school manager Miller. "Dana Brown came to me and

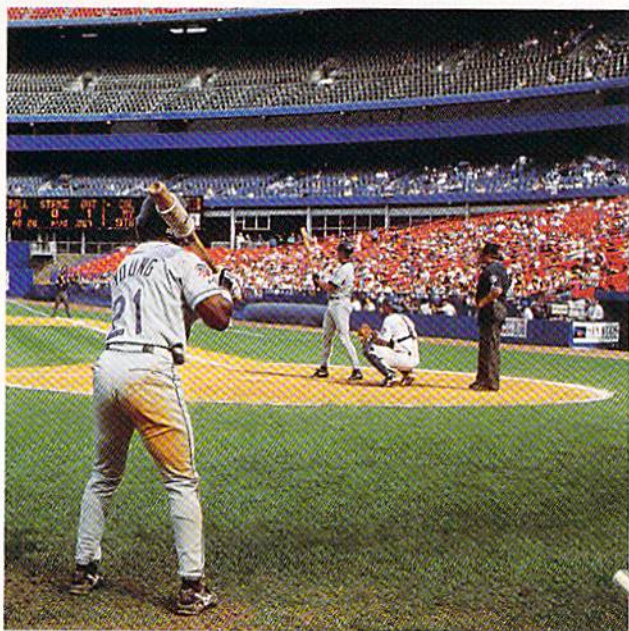
told me that we should get Eric to come out for baseball. But baseball was not his thing; it wasn't high profile. We had to talk him into it, Eric was tremendous in all three sports, but played baseball just to stay in shape and be with his buddies. Now—he's in the major leagues."


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Although Young once walked the same halls, sat in the same classrooms, and ate the same cafeteria food, many students at New Brunswick High School do not know who he is. A more familiar name to them, basketball superstar Michael Jordan, learned firsthand about the skill it takes to hit professional pitching when he put on a Chicago White Sox uniform for parts of two seasons. Jordan, who quickly gave up baseball to return to basketball, might have traded his Nikes to have the kind of year Young had in 1996: a .324 average with 184 hits, 113 runs scored, and 53 stolen bases.

Former teachers and coaches who taught Young light up at the mention of his name. "I'm no sports fan, yet one of the first things I do every day is open up the newspaper and check the box score to find Eric's name," says Janet Obzut, a communications skills teacher. She remembers that her former student "would ask me to pretend that I was interviewing him, and he encouraged me to correct his mistakes—I think he sensed that someday he would be in front of a microphone. His intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm raised the level of the whole class."

In high school, Young was an honor student and coordinator of the Martin Luther King Jr. Players, an oratorical group. William L. Dunbar, teacher, director of the King Players, and longtime friend of the Young family, says Eric hasn't forgotten his roots: Last year Young gave





the school's convocation address and is known for his impromptu visits. "Eric doesn't talk down to students," says Dunbar. "He stresses the importance of academics and having a life plan, and he is very good at relating his personal story on their level."

On one of his visits, Obzut learned just how closely he'd been listening years ago. "We had done a project about poverty and welfare as it related to a certain housing project in Los Angeles," she says. "When Eric played for the Dodgers, he visited that housing project. I was shocked that he had even remembered it."

Young was as proficient on the field as he was in class, earning All-State mention in three sports. While he helped the baseball team to two central New Jersey titles, it was in football that Young—a quarterback with blazing speed—attracted big-time interest. Rutgers, Penn State, Nebraska, Syracuse, and Army all vied for his services. When he decided on Rutgers, his mother "was so happy that I screamed with joy," she says. Adds Young, "Rutgers offered me the chance to play in front of my family and friends, compete right away, and follow my plan, which was to graduate in four years with a business management degree."

That plan did not include baseball, but Dana Brown kept after his friend to pursue the sport. Rutgers baseball coach Fred Hill, who had been impressed with Young's ability when he'd recruited at New Brunswick High, kept the door open. Young felt he could play baseball on the college level, but knew that football players on scholarships were seldom allowed to play two sports. "[Football] Coach [Dick] Anderson made it tough," recalls Young. "He said that if I wanted to play football and baseball, I had to excel academically, be prepared to lose my starting position in football, and make a significant contribution to the baseball team."

Young still had to sell himself to Hill, who didn't take the sophomore on the first two road trips of the season. On the third trip, a spring-break jaunt to Florida, Young—the sixth outfielder on the depth chart—faced his make-or-break moment. "Coach Hill told me he would take me along, but that he couldn't guarantee that I would play," says Young. "In the third or fourth game of the trip, we were blowing out a team, and I was sitting at the end of the bench when I suddenly heard Coach call me to bat. I hit a home run. Then I came up again. I hit another home run. After that, I never came out of the lineup."

The baseball season kept Young from attending spring football practice for most of three years, but despite that disadvantage his name is all over the Scarlet Knights football record books. He ranks second in career kick-return yardage, third in career receptions, and seventh in total yards. An honorable-mention All-American in 1988, his senior year, his most

dramatic moment came when he caught a 60-yard touchdown in Rutgers' 21-16 win over Penn State—the Scarlet Knights' first victory over the Nittany Lions since 1918.

His Rutgers baseball records are just as impressive: first in career triples and second in runs, stolen bases, and single-season runs. He is also in the top 10 in several other categories, including career slugging percentage, total bases, and walks. And all of these stats were compiled in less than three full seasons. Says Hill: "What doesn't show up in statistics is his leadership, his desire, and the fact that he's one of the best clutch hitters I've ever seen."

Young spent his college career in the outfield, however, and after his 1988 graduation, the only major-league franchise to show an interest in him was the Dodgers. Their legendary scout, Gil Bassetti, may never have signed Young at all if LaSalle's bus hadn't broken down on its way to Piscataway for a game against Rutgers. While Bassetti waited for LaSalle to show up, he watched Young field grounders at second base. Bassetti was impressed that, for about an hour,

Young fielded every ball cleanly. At Bassetti's behest, the Dodgers took a flier on Young as a second baseman, drafting him in the 43rd round of the June 1989 draft. He was assigned to the Dodgers' Rookie League affiliate in Kissimmee, Florida.

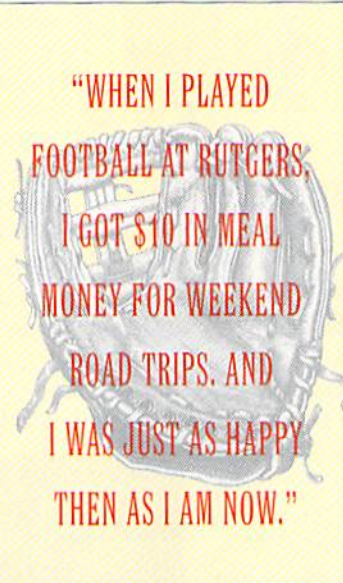
"I realized at that first minor-league mini-camp that it would be difficult to move from outfield to second base," says Young. "But my manager, Jerry Royston, told me to just concentrate on the things I could do best; defense would come later." With the pressure off, Young hit .330 and stole 41 bases in 56 games.

In the Dodgers' minor league system, Young moved up a grade every year despite platooning between the outfield and second base. In 1991, a year before he would make his major league debut, the city of New Brunswick honored him with Eric Young

Day, which included a parade, a dinner at the Hyatt Regency, and a speech by mother Lucille.

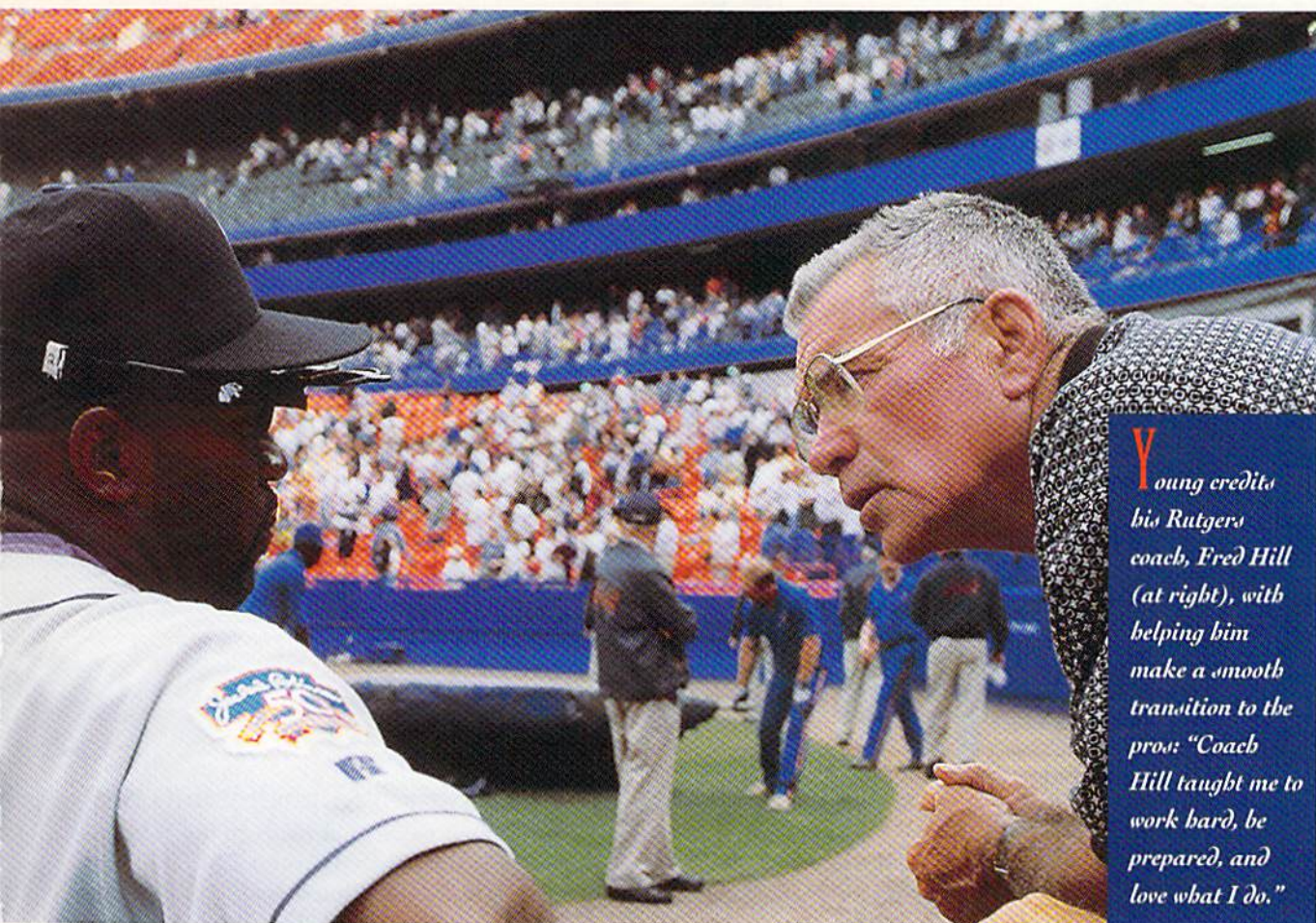
In 1992, the Dodger AAA team in Albuquerque finally used Young exclusively at second base. He was summoned to Los Angeles in July and finished the season with the Dodgers, hitting .258 in 49 games. In the off-season, he was selected by the Rockies when he was left unprotected in the expansion draft. "I was among a group of Dodger infielders that had been labeled the Kiddie Corps," says Young. "I was disappointed [to be let go] because I had been busting my butt all along, trying to prove I could be their second baseman." He had also hoped to follow in the footsteps of one of his idols, Jackie Robinson: "Every time I put on that Dodger uniform I thought of him."

But Young soon realized that, as a Rockie, he would be



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Young credits his Rutgers coach, Fred Hill (at right), with helping him make a smooth transition to the pros: "Coach Hill taught me to work hard, be prepared, and love what I do."

making a fresh start with an organization committed to him. In his first two years with Colorado, he was again shuttled between the infield and outfield. In June 1995, with the Rockies' regular second baseman on the disabled list, Young was moved to the infield for good. He batted .317 and was a dynamic force at the top of the lineup. His breakout season came in 1996, and now he's keen to someday lead the league in hitting. "EY may have been held back by his defense, but he has turned himself into a great second baseman," says Rockies' pitching coach Fred Funk. "Just ask anyone who hits him ground balls in practice; he always wears them out."

Despite the recent success, Young's future with the Rockies is rocky; it will probably be determined over the next several months. Before the season, he signed a one-year, \$3.2 million deal. People familiar with the team speculate that either Young or shortstop Walt Weiss will be packaged with a power hitter in a trade for a starting pitcher. If a swap isn't made, they expect Young to sign a long-term deal during the off-season. Of his future with Colorado, Young says, "We'll see if they step up to the plate."

Young's ultimate dream, not surprisingly, is a World Series ring. But he also mentions another dream: wearing Yankee pinstripes. His Rutgers experience, he says, was especially rewarding because he played in front of his family and friends. He'd like to do that again, this time as a major-leaguer. Being a hometown favorite would also keep him

near his son, 12-year-old Eric Jr., who lives in Piscataway.

Despite the rally sparked by Young in the eighth inning of the Shea Stadium game, the Rockies lose to the Mets on a dramatic home run in the bottom of the ninth. As the players labor dejectedly from the field, Young spies Fred Hill sitting on the rail by the Rockies' dugout. Young heads straight for his former coach, and the pair embrace. Hill consoles Young on the loss, telling him he certainly knows how it feels: Rutgers had recently lost an important game to Villanova in the same fashion. The exchange, cut short by Young's imminent flight to the west coast, ends with parting words of mutual respect and affection.

Earlier in the day, during our interview, Eric had said, "Baseball doesn't feel like a job to me. It still feels like I'm going down to the park in New Brunswick. When I played football at Rutgers, I got \$10 in meal money for weekend road trips. And I was just as happy then as I am now."

When I'd visited New Brunswick High the week before, I had scoffed at Janet Obzut when she gushed, "It isn't just athletics that makes Eric seem like he's one in 10,000." Now I understand why his former high school teacher checks the Rockies' box score every morning. I've been checking it myself in recent days. □

Senior editor Bill Glovin spends a great deal of his leisure time in front of the TV watching sports.