

The Swinger Series – Interviews with MABL Greats

Interview #1- Kevin Spaise

Hey folks. Chip Swinger here, taking a little time to spread the good word of baseball in an interview series where I will spot light players in the MABL. To start off this series I grabbed a slice of pie with Kevin Spaise of the Kihei Centipedes and asked him about his history with baseball, the MABL and life in general. I pushed my Ranger into the parking lot of Akamai Coffee a half hour before my interview with Kevin Spaise to grab a table and get my notes in order, only to find that Kevin had beat me and was waiting with the news that they had closed early. Kevin suggested Maui Pies across the street, and we hopped in his SUV to have some pie and chat. Banana cream was ordered, and we grabbed a table outside next to the slow-moving S. Kihei Rd.

Kevin won the award for the most improved player in the MABL in Spring of 2021 at the age of 66. This is no small accomplishment –Kevin put up the numbers to support his case by batting .267 and stringing together 12 H, an OBP of .313 and a player of the month win in April. It was quite the year for Kevin, and I wanted to try and understand the mindset of a ballplayer with a true lasting love for playing the game. Pushing through the wear on the body 66 years has, Kevin is a steadfast third baseman with a hell of a throw. I still enjoy watching his arcing toss from third while the Pedes warm up before each inning as the ball consistently finds the first baseman's letters. When I brought up that throw to Kevin he trailed off as he told me "It wasn't always like that, you know. Used to be a bullet...". Kevin has survival instinct coursing through his veins. He never lost the ability to get the ball directly to the first baseman, simply arcs a touch and retains his accuracy. You can see it in his fielding as well as his batting. I've been told by many Pedes – they know they will be moved over at least a base by Kevin on a ball hit into whatever gap he chooses to hit to. A lifetime of calculated at-bats led to a purposeful swing. Baseball is like life – you can get frustrated and stop playing or figure out a way to be effective and keep on keepin' on. We all need a little drive within to keep us going and a light from teammates and friends to keep us on the right path. Kevin was eager with a smile to share his life with me.



Q: How old were you when you started playing ball?"

A: I was 8 years old when I started playing baseball, so 58 years ago.

Q: What is your strongest memory from your first year playing baseball?

A: Breaking away from a bunch of kids in my neighborhood that weren't going anywhere and finding something that really meant something to me. Just being a little kid and realizing there was this amazing game I could play with my friends; I couldn't get enough of it.

Q: I hear 30-year-olds, 40-year-olds and 50-year-olds say they are getting too old for this game. How do you bring such a clean energy to all of this at 66?

A: I think it is just enjoying every minute out there and realizing how lucky we are to play baseball on Maui and play with such great guys. I mean, every team is cool. We all get along with each other, then to top it off to have a league that is this organized and well run, it just couldn't get any better.

Q: Who is your biggest hero in baseball, and why?

A: Sandy Koufax. Pitched through pain, pitched more innings than anybody else, wanted the ball. He had arm trouble and knew he was shortening his career but gave every single thing he had for the team every single time he went out. He pitched every 4 games, pitched 382 innings one year. Had 32 complete games one year just a stud that did it better than anybody else. Humble, total team player, no ego, just a total stud and very very fun to watch.



Q: Well, I was going to ask you what the most important trait a baseball player can have but you just gave me a long list! Is there one that stands out to you more than others?

A: Yes. I think loving the game every single time you are out there. It's really a lot to love. When I was young, I took all of that for granted. We played in an all black league in LA when we were 21, maybe 22. Not segregated - just geographically we were the only white guys in the league at this park close to our house. There was this guy who was in his 40's playing first base and every game we would say- what is this guy doing here? He's just in our way, you know he is just this old guy, doesn't he realize his time is done? Doesn't get as many hits... and now here I am, that old guy. It's funny.

Q: I would say you are "that old guy" - if you weren't batting .267! What was going through your mind when you won the most improved player this season?

A: Almost surreal. I almost couldn't even believe it. Well first of all, I felt really lucky to have that streak where I was hitting the ball well. Every week I would be on cloud 9. I can't even tell you - I'd get in my car and drive home with a big smile on my face and then I couldn't wait to get out there again. And those streaks even in little league or high school, they don't come around very often. There is a little luck involved, let's face it. Baseball rewards you when you play the right way, and the baseball Gods remind you when you're not playing the game the right way.



Q: Let's talk about your league in California. How did that all get started?

A: I moved to Redding California from LA, I was in publishing and able to work remotely. I moved to an ideal little town on a river, and everything was going great but there was one thing missing- baseball. I went around to all the employers there was a lumber mill, sporting goods stores and I tried to get teams together. We were able to get 4 teams together and it just kind of took off. Now it is still going and I think they have 15 or 16 teams. It is now the NorCal Hardball Association but when I started it was the Redding hardball Association.

Q: Did you act as the Commissioner through its inception? What was your biggest takeaway from that experience?

A: Not formally, but yeah. We didn't have formal positions it was a little different. We'd just go to the bar after the games and talk about how to make things better and so on and so forth. Biggest takeaway was that a lot of guys that are out of the game for a while miss it, need it, and their lives are so much better because of it.

Q: Awesome, I see a lot of that in the MABL as well. So many guys come to play and get this huge smile on their faces I see it on our team and all around the league.

A: You know, it takes a long time before you realize that. I was the same when I was younger – I have been playing in these leagues since I was 21 years old. And it's fun, its exciting, its always great to play baseball. But now, I reached a stage where really every game seems like it could be the last – and it is a real gift.

Q: Where is your head at when you are in the batter's box, and what do you think about some of the new gear we are seeing players use in this league and investments into new types of gear, bats, gloves etc.? We are starting to look like professional baseball players!

A: Its funny, my wife Sheri goes to all my games- I wouldn't play if it wasn't for her. And she yells -do you know I have never heard her say anything? I don't hear any of it. When I'm in the batter's box I don't hear our guys, I know they say stuff. It's all about the mental investment, 100%. As far as buying the sticks and the stuff, it's a fun aspect for everyone. Yeah, it might give them an infinitesimal edge over some of the other guys but it's just the fun of it. It's almost like they're stepping into a big leaguers' shoes because big league guys talk about all that stuff, it's just another aspect of enjoyment of the game. And you know, from a guy that has literally never used a pair of batting gloves in my life I learn a lot from our guys that are into it – you know the weight and the styles of different gloves alone. It's really cool.

Q: How about superstitions? Pitchers are infamous.

A: I tried to eat scrambled eggs every time I pitched. But I think that was because I was convinced it would help me some other way nutritionally.



Q: Speaking of pitching – Summer of 2013 you pitched 41 and 2/3 innings with 50Ks. Does that summer stand out in your memory, what was going on that season? Because you have pitched a lot in your MABL career, but this season specifically was almost double your inning average.”

A: Oh man, I didn't even know. It always amazes me when I get through an inning, and I want the next one and the next one and I think it was a combination of really being able to do it at that point – what was that 8 years ago, so I was 58 then? There is a big physical difference that I don't want to accept that I feel but you know for the most part – and this sounds odd I know – I feel like I'm 35 years old every day in everything I do! I think the better you do something the more you enjoy it, the more you enjoy it the more you want to do it I'm sure that had a lot to do with it. Satchel Page was in his 60s so no excuses!

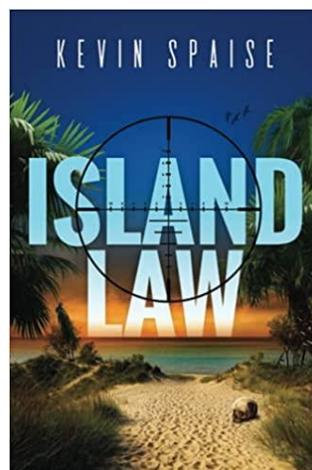
Q: Alright Kev. Fun one for a wise man... what do you think happens when we die?

A: Ah... I know there is something more powerful than us, I think it has something to do with what happens when we die but I don't know. It's a mystery. I don't have any opinions on it – except that I have lived enough to know that our energy, what we do and how we treat people 100% comes back. 100%! I didn't know that until I was 40, 45. I didn't believe any of that. I was just on a different plane and didn't believe it. And now I know it to be true.”

Q: What do you hope to walk away from your last game of baseball with?

A: I think I already have it. I see the love and the respect I have from my teammates and it is so overwhelming to me that I know I'll never lose that from these guys. I think that is it.

While Kevin fell in love with baseball at the age of 8, he fell in love with sports writing in High School when he started covering his school's football games for The South Bay Daily Breeze in Southern California. Following that he worked for the LA Times writing about sports and eventually wrote for high-speed boat magazines. At one point in Kevin's career a boating magazine he was working for was purchased by Larry Flynt trying to “go straight” and get out of pornography. Kevin was upgraded from a “po-dunk office” to a corner office on Wilshire and La Cienega in Beverly Hills with a full staff in a few days. Kevin had a wild ride as a writer covering sports of all kinds and high speed boat reporting. And though he has transitioned into real estate as a profession these days, he still loves to write and just wrapped up a novel titled *Island Law*. *Island Law* is available to purchase on Amazon and is a contemporary political thriller that takes place on the island of Maui.



Kevin Spaise inspires me. His smile is warm, and his eyes are wise. His whole body lit up while talking about baseball. He is a happy man with a beautiful loving family. I was in the presence of true appreciation and a humble attitude. I hope to still be walking at 66 let alone playing baseball, holding down third base and batting .267. Life is unpredictable, sometimes difficult and sometimes easy as pie. If I learned anything from Kevin it is that a positive outlook on life and a grateful approach to each Sunday baseball game certainly won't give you immortality, but it will deliver you happiness while you are still around. So, pray to the baseball Gods and eat your scrambled eggs.

-Chip Swinger

Thanks Kevin.



Photo Credit

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