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Rob O'Flanagan/Guelph Mercury

Former Major League Baseball pitcher Bill Lee, 63, shows the grip for his notorious circle change, a pitch that still baffles hitters and induces ground-ball outs.

The Spaceman cometh: former pitching great holds court at Guelph sports dinner

ROB O'FLANAGAN, MERCURY STAFF

GUELPH — Bill "Spaceman" Lee, 63, signed my old Rawlings first baseman's glove Wednesday night.

I pulled it out of my shoulder bag after a long and winding interview with the former Boston Red Sox lefty, who was in town to speak at the annual Kiwanis Club Sports Celebrity Dinner.

He took one look at the glove and said, "Now that's a beauty – top shelf." He tried it on, checked it out. "That's the real thing right there." I was very proud.

The glove is from the 1970s, a "Heart of the Hide" Steve Garvey model. But from now on, it's the Bill Lee model.

I asked Lee for a bit of throwing advice, telling him the old arm is not what it used to be – that it aches something fierce when I throw. He checked out my "brakes" – the cartilage in my shoulder joint – and said, "Oh, you're good, you're brakes are good. All you need to do is throw more." I felt born again.

Renowned for his unconventional world view, for his outspoken left-wing views and his advocacy for players/workers rights, Lee was a top big league pitcher through the 1970s, winning 17 games each year for three straight years, from 1973-75.

He had two solid starts in the legendary 1975 World Series between his Red Sox and the Cincinnati Reds, widely thought to be the greatest series in the history of baseball. I kept scorecards for each one of the seven games. I was 15.

Lee was a rebellious figure – a role model for his nonconformity and his originality. Far from an overpowering pitcher, he relied on nasty junk more than gas.

His career ended in an untimely fashion with the Montreal Expos in 1982, and he and many sports commentators believe he was blacklisted from the league because of his activism.

This year, at the age of 63, he became the oldest pitcher ever to win a professional baseball game, leading his Brockton Sox of the Can-Am League to a victory over Worcester. Up until Lee's feat, Satchel Paige, at 59, was the oldest man to pitch in a professional game.

"Like Satchel said, 'It's mind over matter. If you don't mind, it don't matter,'" Lee said, quoting a hero. "I have a good curve, I have a good circle change, and I throw just hard enough to keep 'em off balance."

I asked if he was still good enough to pitch in the big leagues after the '82 season.

"By the fact that I won at the age of 63, the answer is yes," he said. "I'm Jamie Moyer on steroids." Moyer, 47, has pitched in the majors since 1986.

I asked Lee if he is still bitter about being exiled from the big leagues.

"Always," he said. "They say you've got to get over it and I'm going, why? What they did to me was totally illegal. It was collusion. It was against the spirit of sport. And it was all because they wanted to suppress me because I'm a unionist, I'm a socialist and I'm a Bolshevik."

When Lee was let go by the Expos, apparently because of his protest over the release of a fellow player, no other team would pick him up.

But Lee has never been out of baseball – not since birth. Born in Burbank, Calif., he inherited the baseball gene from a grandfather and an aunt who played professionally. He started playing young and still plays old.

When he's not taking the mound for Brockton or for his senior men's league team, he is a maker of bats for big leaguers like David Ortiz and Robinson Cano, cutting maple and yellow birch from his own woodlot in Vermont.

He was making bats for Nokona before the company declared bankruptcy, and plans to come out with a new line of bats soon called "The Cure."

"Because of all these years of playing with aluminum bats in little league, high school and college, the hitting is not as good, and that is starting to show in the majors," he said. There has been a resurgence of pitching, maybe in part because of a decline in steroid use, he said.

There are a lot of great pitchers in the game, Lee said, naming Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee and Tim Lincecum as examples. But he said there aren't many free thinkers in baseball – none as free-thinking as he was/is.

"Outspoken? Yes. Concerned about society? No," he said. "The problem with capitalism is it breeds rampant arrogance. When you have the money, you don't have to be nice to people, and you're kind of isolated from the masses. They have agents, they have lawyers – they're insular. They live in gated communities. They're not the same as us, who lived in apartment complexes and commuted to the games together."

In the United States, he said, money is the biggest influence on the political landscape.

"All these political ads are disinformation that appeals to the emotional side, not the intellectual side of people's brains," he argued. "That causes people to vote poorly, I think."

Society is getting worse, not better, he said. Despite his gloomy outlook, Bill Lee appears to be a very happy man.

When Lee isn't pitching, pontificating or making bats in his workshop, he makes wine. About 1,000 cases of his "Spaceman" wine is bottled each year, made from California grapes and sold in the Boston area. The money he makes from the vineyard affords him the luxury of being "politically incorrect" wherever he goes.

"Since I won in Brockton, everybody wants to have what I'm drinking," he said.

Lee said he will always stick up for the little guy and the underdog.

"You'll never catch me on the side of the majority."

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