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THE LEAD

Al Kaline, an unlikely friendship and a lasting message

Cody Stavenhagen (/author/cody-stavenhagen/) Apr 8, 2020

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Connor Perry was washing his car Saturday when the phone rang. He missed the call.

Later, he saw a voicemail from a most unlikely friend. Perry is 22 years old, a 28th-round draft pick, a .236 hitter last year in the Gulf Coast League. He is virtually unknown in the Detroit Tigers farm system.

The voicemail was from an 85-year-old man, a Hall of Famer, the guy everyone calls Mr. Tiger. The call was from Al Kaline.

Perry called Kaline back that afternoon, and Kaline told Perry he had just gotten home from the hospital. He was sick and feeling weak. Still, they talked. Perry says Kaline ended the conversation with a reminder.

Keep working hard. Whatever you do, do not give up.

Monday, Kaline died at his home. His health had been deteriorating for the past year.

In the few days since, Perry has been thinking of Florida lunch rooms, swings off the tee and the quiet grace of a legend. The list of lives Kaline touched is long. In just a few short weeks, Connor Perry had become Al Kaline's newest friend and, also, his last.

"That's a question I've been asking myself," Perry said. "Why me?"

Spring training in Lakeland, Fla. Al Kaline sat alone in the corner of the Tigers' weight room. He was there every day.

A trainer approached Perry, who was rehabbing a wrist injury. "I'm a little nervous," the trainer said. "Do you know who that is over there?"

Perry peered over to see a legend, waiting for his workout.

"Yeah, I think I know who that is," Perry said. "That's Al Kaline, isn't it?"

Up until his final days, Kaline met with a team trainer, stretching his back and using resistance bands to keep his aging muscles strong. One day, he walked by Perry in the training room. They had never met before.

"Is that all you can lift?" Kaline teased.

Perry and Kaline kept arriving every day at the same time. Workouts turned to conversations. Conversations turned to stories. Stories turned into a mentorship. A mentorship became something more like friendship.

Such ways were in Kaline's nature. Tigers general manager Al Avila called Kaline the father or grandfather of the organization. He was also approachable to all.

"He didn't make you feel like, 'You're a legend and I'm a nobody,'" Avila said. "He didn't make you feel that way at all."

Still, the question nags. Why, Perry wonders, did he click so well with Al Kaline? Why did Kaline care?

For as warm and beloved as he was, Kaline was more on the introverted side. Shy by nature. He did not bring attention to himself or seek out an audience for tales of his playing days.

Perry is more extroverted, without sacrificing perspective. As he grew to know Kaline, Perry loved to ask questions. He says he realized how much he could learn. He wonders if Kaline appreciated that.

Maybe, though, the friendship was something more. Perhaps Al Kaline could sense something else in Connor Perry. Something different.

“I love players like you,” Kaline told him once.



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Connor Perry led Pitt with 15 home runs in 2019. (Jaylynn Nash / Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)
carolina-v-pittsburgh/)

Out of Norwin High School in Pennsylvania, no one wanted Connor Perry. He had no Division I college offers. No one else even wanted to give him a scholarship.

He went to play baseball at Lock Haven, a Division II school in Central Pennsylvania, and after his first semester, he was cut from the team.

That spring, he took a job at McDonald's, just trying to get by. He considered giving up on baseball, but instead, he started making calls, trying to find somewhere else to keep his dream alive.

Someone told him about a junior college in Scranton with a funny name. Lackawanna. They had a good baseball team but still needed some players. Perry received a call from the coach, Bruce Thompson, and set up a meeting. He told his manager at McDonald's, who looked at Perry like he was insane.

"You're working at McDonald's right now," the manager said. "Do you really think you're going to become a professional?"

Perry looked at the manager and laughed. "You're probably right," he said. "What am I even doing?"

Following his heart, Perry showed up at Lackawanna. He drove through the rain with his grandfather to visit the school. He told coaches he wasn't even sure if he was good enough. All he wanted was a chance. They offered him a jersey and \$500 to help with tuition.

"If you want to do this, you gotta do it now," he told himself.

"A lot of buddies joke with me," he said. "They say I fell off the earth. I just went tunnel-vision mode. All I wanted to do was be the best I could be."

He ended up setting school records at Lackawanna, hitting .357 over two seasons as a starter. "How am I doing this?" he asked himself the whole time.

Two years at Lackawanna led to an offer from the University of Pittsburgh. During one game as a junior, on national TV against North Carolina, Perry says he looked down at his own shadow and had a strange flashback, sitting at McDonald's, never really dreaming he would be here.

In his junior season, though, Perry hit .190. He knew what people were saying. *It was all a fluke. He's only a DII player.* Entering his senior year, despite a good fall, he did not earn a starting role.

But Perry is the type of person who has faith in a higher power, who believes in signs. Before his first game as a senior, played at the Disney complex in Florida, he says he said a prayer. Then he looked up, saw a plane spelling words in the sky. The plane, Perry says, had just finished the “D” in “Trust God.”

“That hit me hard,” Perry said. “I trusted God and knew if I got an opportunity I had to make the best of it.”

In the second game of the season, Pittsburgh trailed Iowa 10-0. Perry got an at-bat. He got down in the count 0-2. And then he hit a home run.

By the end of the season, he had 15 homers. He led the team.

Entering draft night last summer, Perry heard talk he would go in the top 10 rounds. But the phone stayed silent other than a call from the Mets. They wanted to take him in the ninth round, but they hadn’t allocated the money to make it happen. Perry was not drafted until the 28th round, when the Tigers finally called.

He turned to his father that night and said: “This would only be true to my story if this happened like this.”

Weight room conversations turned to lunchtime meals. One day, Perry entered the cafeteria alone and sat down. Al Kaline came and found him. “Why aren’t you sitting by me?” Kaline said.

Another time, Perry showed up at a team Bible study. A few minutes later, Kaline walked through the door, strutted across the room, sat down right beside him.

Perry has always been the type to seek out mentors. Sometimes he gets teased by teammates. Sometimes people view it the wrong way.

“Those guys will change your life,” Perry said. “You’re the average of the three or four people you’re around, so if you surround yourself with guys like that, you’re gonna be a good person on and off the field.”

In the course of a few weeks, the relationship between Perry and Kaline evolved. Perry says Kaline almost seemed as interested in him as he was Kaline. In the Tigers organization, Kaline was beloved, from stars such as Justin Verlander to rookies new in the major-league clubhouse.

Some minor-league players, still, were intimidated by Kaline. Others came to the Tigers without even knowing who he was. Often, though, Kaline would go out of his way to greet newcomers.

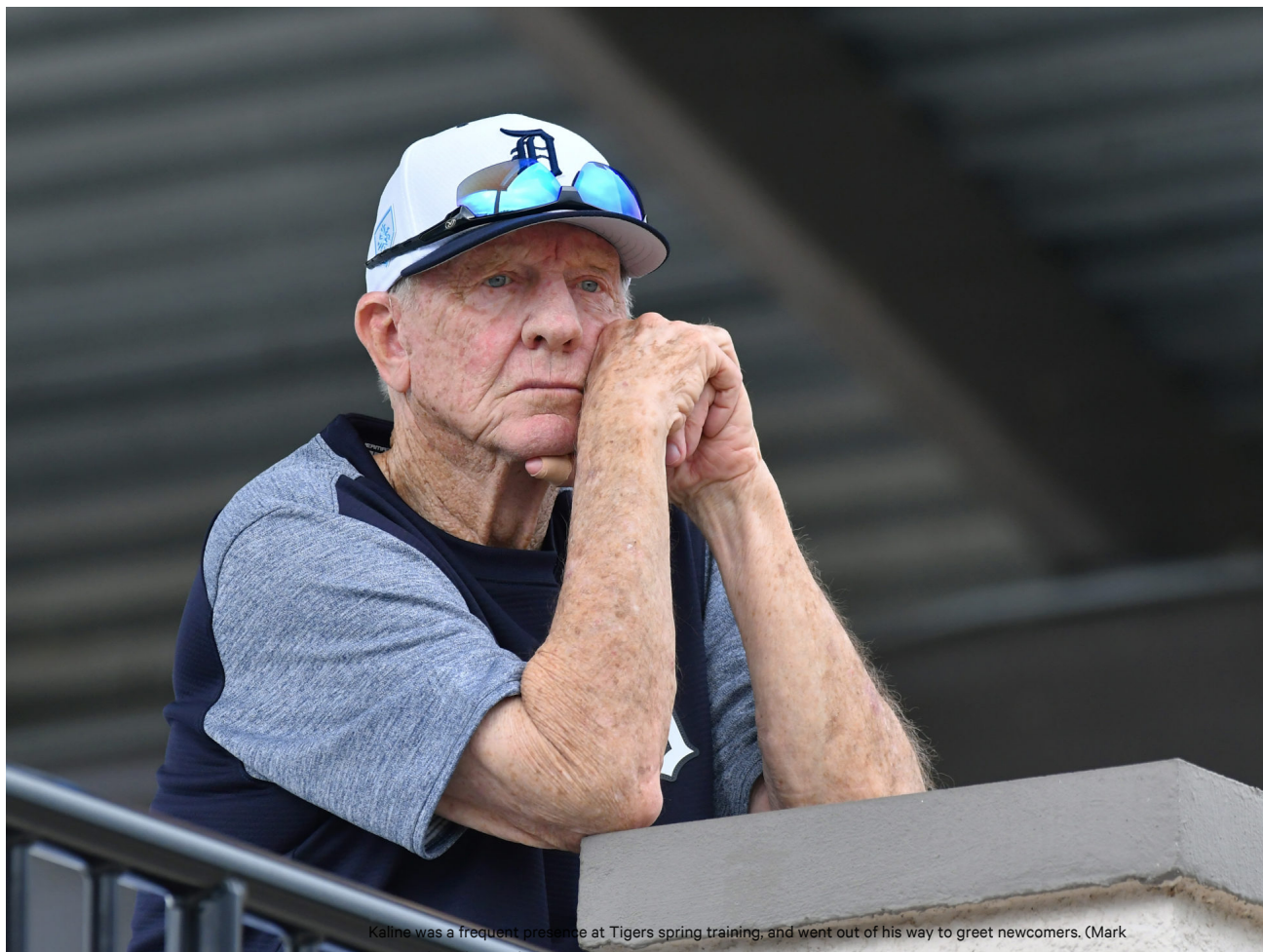
“A guy like that, you’ll never know he’s Al Kaline,” Perry said. “You’ll never know he did what he did. He won’t even tell you stories unless you ask.”

But once you got Kaline going, Perry says, the stories would not stop. He spent days listening to tales of Ted Williams and Babe Ruth, of Kaline’s old 35-inch bat, of his long career as a broadcaster after his playing days were over.

“The things that came out of his mouth were so genuine and pure,” Perry says. “It was a really cool thing.”

Perry, too, got to know another side of Kaline not all get to see. The corny jokes. The dry sense of humor.

Sometimes, he would watch Kaline work out in the mornings and feel inspired. A man who had to know his time was getting small, still driving himself, still embracing the joy of life.



Kaline was a frequent presence at Tigers spring training, and went out of his way to greet newcomers. (Mark Cunningham / MLB Photos via Getty Images)

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Kaline talked about meeting Perry in the batting cages, but they never set a time.

One morning, Perry ventured out to hit. He was stopped by Hall of Fame shortstop Alan Trammell. “Really?” Trammell asked, half-joking but mostly serious. “Did you seriously stand up Mr. Tiger?”

Perry froze for a moment. He ventured over to the cage to find Kaline, who had been waiting for more than an hour. They never scheduled a time, but Kaline thought he would simply wait for Perry in the cage. *I just thought you'd be here*, Kaline said.

Perry says Kaline had a saying: *I can't teach you how to hit, but I can tell you how I hit*. Kaline would place ball after ball on the tee, watching Perry's swing. Perry was still on the comeback from a wrist injury, so he was a little nervous. After a few swings, Kaline might stand up, take the bat in his hand, get in his old hitting stance. His pointers, Perry says, were always simple yet poignant.

“This might sound weird, but Al Kaline is putting the ball on the tee for me,” Perry said. “Like, that doesn’t make any sense. I don’t deserve that, you know what I mean? That was something really cool to realize: This guy is taking the time to put a ball on the tee so I can swing, and he’s not getting anything out of it.”

Perry and Kaline hit together during Kaline’s last day in Lakeland, before Kaline journeyed back to Detroit, before the coronavirus outbreak put spring training on hold.

Before they parted ways, Kaline asked Perry if they could take a picture. Kaline handed someone else his phone and had them snap a photo. Then Kaline texted the picture to Perry.

“Seeing the contact name, AL KALINE, is unreal,” Perry said. “And then he’s sending me pictures of me and him? Unreal.”

By the end of spring training, everyone could tell Al Kaline’s health was declining fast. His wife, Louise, worried about him dressing in uniform, worried about him showing up each day. But it is what Kaline wanted to do. He wanted to watch the big-league club. Maybe more so, he wanted to talk with and help players like Connor Perry.

“I can tell you’re hungry,” Kaline told Perry once. “I can tell you want it.”

Kaline went about business as usual. Each day, he would eat either breakfast or lunch with Al Avila. Still watched games. Still talked to players. But he started looking more frail. Didn’t have quite the same energy.

“It came fast,” Avila said. “You could see Al Kaline at the stadium or spring training every year, you thought the guy would never get old.”

The days went by after spring training ended, everyone stuck in the same limbo without baseball. Perry and Kaline called each other once or twice a week. Perry tried to make sure he called a little more often than Kaline.

When Perry talked with Kaline over the weekend, he was concerned.

Monday, Perry got a text from his agent with the news. Al Kaline had died.

Perry sat back in his chair, trying to process their last moments together.

“I hate to say this, but I think I’m probably the last person he ever hit with in his life,” Perry said. “I think I’m the last person he ever played catch with in his life. I think I’m the last person who ever watched him take a swing in his life.”

Perry later went on a walk with his father. They were talking about Mr. Kaline, and then it hit.

“I think I have a voicemail from him,” Perry said.

He pulled his phone from his pocket, and there it was. Al Kaline’s name was on the screen. A message from the weekend. Perry hit play. The snippets stuck in his mind.

Hey Connor, I just got out of the hospital. I wanted to give you a call.

I’m pretty sick right now.

I wish you the best. Good luck with everything.

“He wasn’t saying goodbye to me, but you could tell he was in bad shape,” Perry said.

Over the past few days, Perry has played the voicemail. He shared it with Jeff Totten, the team chaplain. He reached out to Kaline’s wife and family.

Kaline’s voice remains on the phone, but Perry has started to realize something else. The message is less about the words, more about the act. Asking someone about their day. Learning their story. Picking up the phone, and mostly, letting someone know you care.

“That’s Al Kaline,” Perry said. “People don’t realize how special that man was.”

(Top photo: Courtesy of Connor Perry)

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