

Hall of Fame

Making it look easy

Tom Banner hit with confidence but struggled in silence

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

When Tom Banner was drafted by Baltimore in 1982, the Orioles shifted Cal Ripken Jr. from third base to shortstop to make room for the former Blue Knight. For a while, Banner battled through the minor leagues. He was hitting .320 when he walked away from the game.

He was sick of living

Athlete

paycheck to paycheck. He was tired of sleeping in campgrounds and trying to survive on \$600 per month. Ever since that decision, he's been plagued by teammates and fans asking how he could leave the game. How could he give it up? He was good enough to move a hall of fame infielder. Why? Why? Why?

After almost three decades, Banner has had enough. The pause on the other end of the phone interview is finally broken by a trembling voice. "It was all a lie," he said. "I could tell you a story, and I want to. But I don't know how deeply I want to get into this."

No, his abilities weren't a lie. Banner was one of the best hitters to ever step to the plate at Southington High School. From the time his frustrated grandfather switched the young boy to a lefty, Banner became a natural hitter. He led off the Blue Knight lineup in his sopho-

more season, led the offense with a .410 batting average, and powered the team to a 22-1 record. He drew attention with a .471 average the following season. He was all-conference, all-American, and captain his senior season.

"He was just a natural hitter, and he's always been a great hitter," said Jim Gugliotti, a former teammate and Southington's current American Legion baseball coach. "Even when he was nine years old in Little League, he was a great hitter. He hardly ever struck out. He seemed to always get hits, and he always got the bat on the ball."

But trouble was brewing for Banner. He had a confident air as he strode to the plate as a senior, but his young mind was playing tricks.

"When I was going into my senior year of high school, I developed a terrible case of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)," he said. "That senior year was the first time that I had to put up with it."

The shortstop's batting average plummeted to .303—a dream for most players but a sub-par performance for Banner. A distressing thought would pop into his head, and it became a struggle to think about anything else. This was the start of a long, painful journey that lasted for more than two decades.

Too ashamed to admit it, he suffered silently while teammates and coaches

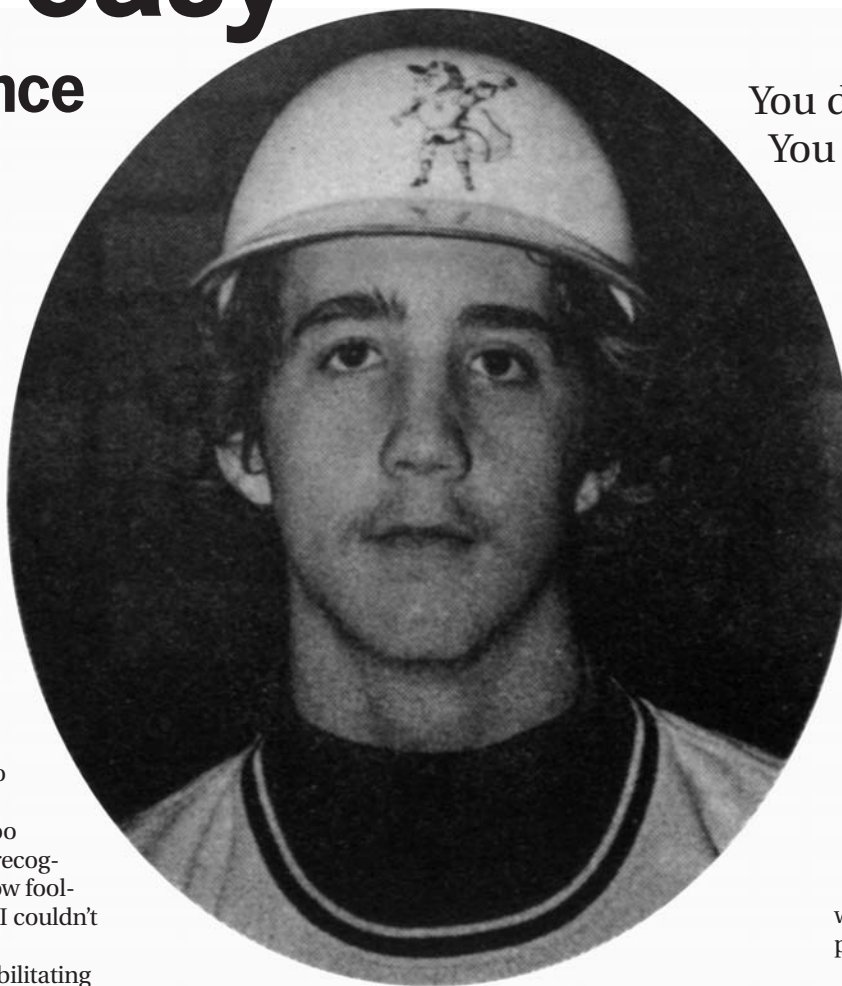
offered tips and suggestions at the plate.

"I'm proud of myself because I had this problem on my mind constantly—even when I was playing baseball—yet I was still able to do well," he said. "It was something that I was never able to say to anybody because it was too embarrassing. I recognized, myself, how foolish it seems, but I couldn't stop it."

OCD is a debilitating condition that affects about two percent of the population. It is not well recognized now but was even less understood in 1978.

Sufferers get bombarded by recurrent thoughts or impulses that could manifest into compulsive actions like repetitive hand-washing or checking and rechecking doors or alarm clocks. It's caused by a chemical imbalance, and it can't be stopped by willpower alone.

In some cases, there are no outward symptoms. A single thought or obsession clings to the mind like a skip in a record. This form, nicknamed "Pure-O" for "Purely Obsessional OCD," is the kind that Banner felt, and it can be debilitating. It's called



Tom Banner, Baseball player

COURTESY OF THE 1978 SHS BASEBALL YEARBOOK

In 1978, Southington Sports Hall of Fame inductee Tom Banner was suffering in silence while he was greeted by cheers.

the silent epidemic because victims suffer in silence.

"Most people never seek treatment because it's too embarrassing," Banner said. "We realize how ridiculous our symptoms are, but we're helpless to stop it. You get a thought or an image in your mind, and it plays over and over again. It creates so much anxiety that you spend hours trying to rationalize it away. You get caught in this cycle, a spike, or a bad thought. Then you go into a rumination cycle. Then you feel better only to have the spike occur again because you have no control over it."

So when his teammates were studying the pitcher, clearing their thoughts, and swinging the bat, Banner was waging war with his mind, and still getting hits.

Banner's thoughts cleared after graduation, and he traveled to the Philippines on an all-star team. He relaxed, hit over .600, won the MVP trophy, and returned home. He attended the University of New Haven and dominated the lineup for two seasons until a sketch artist rendered him for the front cover of the media book. His OCD returned with a vengeance.

"Look at my career. What are the stressors? You have the senior year in high school, and that's when it first came on. Then, it calmed down in my first two years of college. Then, it was my draft year, my junior year, and the stressor came

back again," said Banner. "I kept it a secret. I was wrestling with it constantly on the baseball field and at home. You don't sleep well. You don't eat well, but you don't say anything either because of the stigma."

Once again, his numbers plummeted. Banner had received a pile of cards from major league scouts at Christmas, but the spring sent them scurrying. When the season ended, Banner packed his bag and returned to Cape Cod to try to rebuild his credentials and recapture the attention of scouts. He played well, was drafted by the Orioles, and began his final chapter in baseball.

Banner still remembers that rainy day in Durham, NC when he finally had enough. Even though he loved baseball, the undiagnosed condition was tearing him apart.

"I couldn't eat very much. I couldn't sleep very well, and I was spending all my time ruminating—on the bus, in the hotel, and on the ball field," he said. "I just didn't want to suffer any more. To this day, everybody still asks me why I didn't stay. They tell me I could have made it, and that story about Cal Ripken comes up."

Banner said that there were only six or seven people who knew the whole truth. When Gugliotti found out this past year, it came as a shock. Anybody that saw Banner play would think that he was cool and calm

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when he stepped to the plate.

"Tom Banner has to be one of the top three hitters to come out of Southington High School, and I could never tell that there was anything wrong," said Gugliotti. "I just can't imagine how he dealt with the mental aspect. We've had kids come through the American Legion team with problems like ADD, and I know what those kids go through. When Tom told me about his affliction, I just couldn't imagine him being able to deal with a sport where you fail more than you succeed."

The Southington Sports Hall of Fame committee selected Banner as one of the top athletes in town history. He was so good at baseball that he is one of the only single-sport athletes chosen to represent the inaugural class. He considered quietly entering the hall of fame on Wednesday, Nov. 10 during an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf, but his conscience wouldn't let him.

He had finally sought help at 32. He was diagnosed and treated. He has now been symptom-free for the last 12 years. He couldn't let others suffer as long.

"It's been a monkey on my back for a long time, and my story might help someone else," he said. "I just feel that I owe it to everyone that ever came up to me and asked me why I quit. I owe it to my coaches that busted their hump to make me better. I owe it to the players that came up to me and asked me why I quit. They said that they'd die to be me and have that chance. It's just time."

To comment on this story or to contact sports writer John Goralski, email him at jgoralski@southingtonobserver.com.

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Jim Gugliotti, Southington American Legion baseball coach

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Holds 7 SHS baseball records

- Most at bats in a single season (100 in 1976)
- Most at bats in a career (276)
- Most career hits (109)
- Hitting streak, single season (20 games, 1977)
- Hitting Career hitting streak (28 games, 76-78)
- Fewest strikeouts, single season (2K in 87 AB, 1977).
- Fewest strikeouts, career (5K in 276 AB, 1976-78).

BATTING STATISTICS BY YEAR

1976—41 Hits, 22 RBI, 21 Runs, .410 Avg.
 1977—44 Hits, 19 RBI, 26 Runs, .471 Avg.
 1978—27 Hits, 17 Runs, 15 SB, .303 Avg.

- Team captain (1978)
- All-conference (1976, 1977, 1978)
- All-American (1978)
- Drafted by Baltimore Orioles (1978)