

By Chuck Korbar

Evening Observer

June 10, 1982

Dave Criscione Dunkirk's Lone Major Leaguer

It was July 25, 1977, the beginning and the end of Dave Criscione's major league baseball career.

The 1969 Dunkirk High School graduate, who was drafted by the Washington Senators and signed in August, has paid his dues in the minor leagues.

His name has cropped up on rosters in the New York-Penn League, Western Carolina League, Carolina League, Eastern League, Pacific Coast League and International League.

Now, finally, eight years after he started he was in the major leagues with the Baltimore Orioles.

Up for a cup of coffee, they called it. Rick Dempsey had been hit by Don Gullet and suffered a broken hand. The Orioles needed a backup catcher for their backup catcher--10 days duty, tops.

"I didn't even get a chance to dunk my donut," Criscione quipped, his sense of humor still intact after one of the most unusual minor league experiences in 100 years of EVENING OBSERVER sports history.

He was called up from Rochester on July 7 and finally saw his first action as a backup catcher to Dave Scaggs five days later.

For seven games in a row the four-year CCIAC baseball All-Star came on in the late innings and during the four-day All-Star break he missed an exhibition in Rochester. His wife, still there, had daughter Keri Lee.

That Sunday he caught the second game of a double header and his first hit. The next night, July 25, Dave Criscione had a pinch home run in the 11th inning that beat Milwaukee and he became an instant hero to Baltimore fans.

"I was a typical guy. People can identify with somebody like that," he recalls now. "I'd paid my dues in the minor leagues in order to get there."

But his minor league background didn't matter. Neither did the fact that he had had an excellent spring training with the Orioles, getting a hit both times at bat.

The handwriting was on the wall.

“I was being sent down. Earl Weaver was supposed to tell me after the game,” recalls Criscione.

He wasn’t told that night. The fans and media had made the 5-7, 185 pound backstop an instant hero. Baltimore brass had to hold up on their plans.

Dave was with the team on its Western swing and played one more week in Baltimore. But the die was cast.

“Kenny Rudolph had been released by San Francisco and they (Baltimore) had already made the deal. The just had to wait for him to clear waivers,” Dave reflects.

“I happened to go into a few games, and I did well. But he (Rudolph) had eight or nine years in the big leagues, and had played for Weaver before.

“Rudolph joined us in Seattle and that pretty much ended my playing time right there. I was put on the shelf. I wasn’t going to see anything after that.”

Dave was sent back to Rochester. The next year he asked the Orioles to trade him, but they refused, insisting he’d be an inspiration to the younger players coming up and might yet get his chance in the big leagues.

Kevin Kennedy was the latest budding superstar. The first time through he set the International League on fire. After that the Red Wings had to count on their standby, Dave Criscione, once again. Dave batted .273 with eight home runs in his final pro baseball season.

He finally hung it up. His chance never would come.

He had fulfilled all of the promise predicted of him. In his short stint in the major league he batted .333.

He was a victim of a generation of superstars and bonuses, a craftsman whose stock in trade wasn’t what you see but what you get—hustle, desire and accomplishment.

But for Dave Criscione the chance never came.

