

In a League of his Own

There are athletes, and then there are those who pass on their stories and legacies for generations to come. No sport brings generations together better than baseball. No one does it better than Tim Kurkjian.

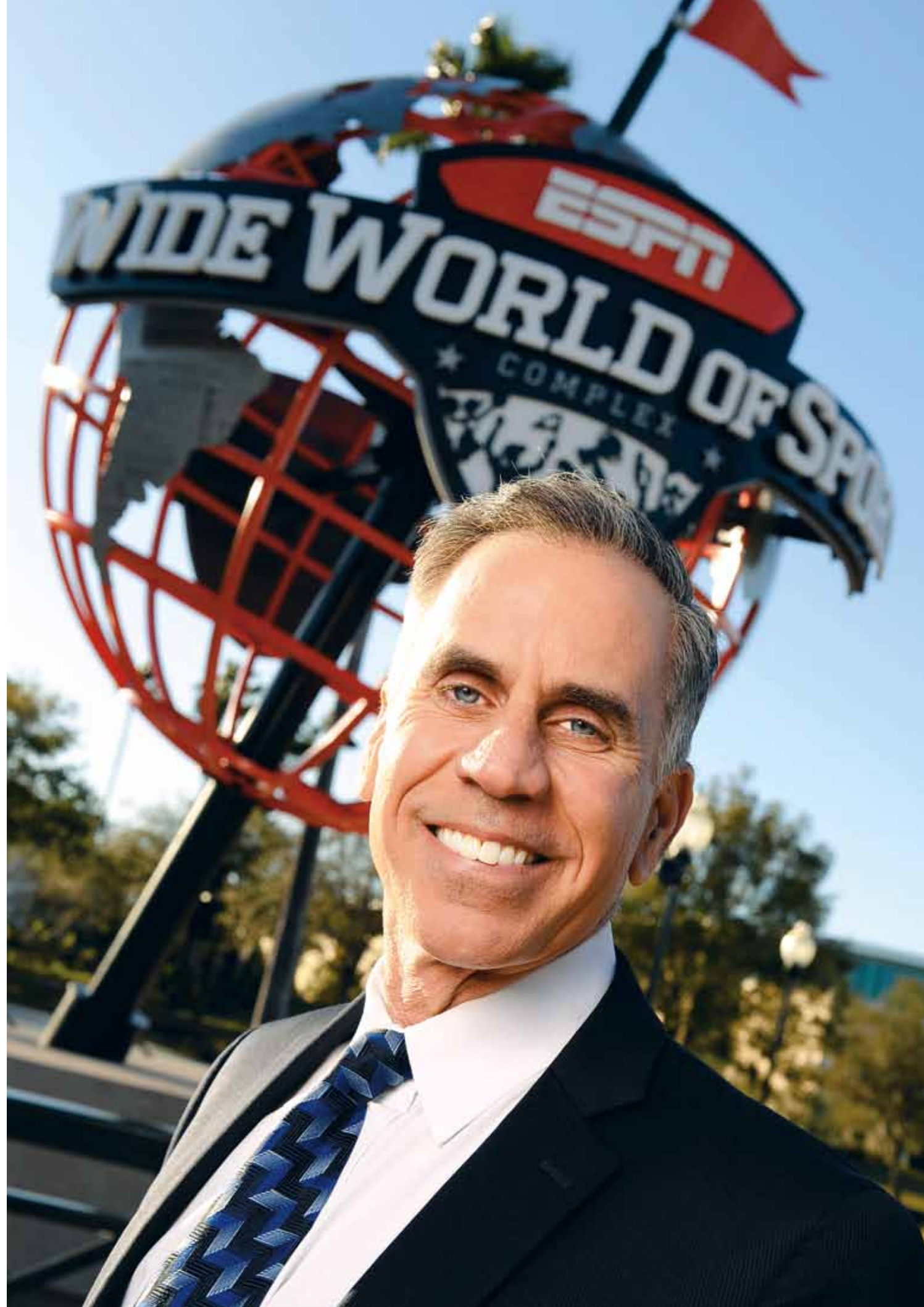
Text **Manouk Akopyan**

Tim Kurkjian is a graduate of Walter Johnson High School, named after the greatest pitcher of all time. Kurkjian wrote for *The Pitch*, the school's appropriately named newspaper that nods to both journalism and baseball. For the last 14 years, everyday from the months of February through October, viewers have watched his Ruthian-like performances on ESPN's Baseball Tonight and Sportscenter. There's only one catch. He's not a baseball player; he's the network's lead baseball analyst and reporter extraordinaire. Topping the charts at 5'5", his act is nonetheless large both on-screen and in

real life. He talks about baseball with a boyish enthusiasm not seen even in a little leaguer standing in line for a snow cone after a game. Statistics roll off his tongue verbatim as if reading the back of a baseball card. The acronyms he abides by are ERA, OPS, SLG.

"There are players in the majors – whether its Dustin Pedroia or David Eckstein – who aren't that much bigger than I am. It's one of the great beauties of the game and another reason why I love baseball, because it's open to all shapes and sizes," Kurkjian says. "I'd like to be as big as Mark McGwire one day, but I'll take what I got at 140 pounds." ▶

"Tim's a grinder, he works hard, and is very knowledgeable and passionate about the game, and people respect the heck out of him," says Orioles Manager Buck Showalter.



Tim Kurkjian

Tim was born in Bethesda, Maryland, on Dec. 10, 1956, where baseball was spoken daily by his father Badrig Kurkjian, who went by the name "Jeff." Tim's grandparents on his father's side came to Watertown, Massachusetts after the massacre. His mother is from England. Today, Kurkjian and his wife Kathy live in Darnestown, Maryland and have two children, Kelly, 20, and Jeff, 17. His journalism career began with the *Washington Star* in 1978 following his graduation from the University of Maryland the same year. He also worked briefly for the *Baltimore News American* in 1981 prior to beginning a professional career covering baseball as the Texas Rangers beat writer for the *Dallas Morning News*, where he worked from 1981 to 1985. He then covered the Baltimore Orioles for the *Baltimore Sun* beginning in 1986 to 1989. He was a senior writer for *Sports Illustrated* from 1989-1997 as well as a reporter for *CNN-SI* from 1996-1997. Kurkjian joined ESPN in March 1998 as both an analyst and reporter for Baseball Tonight and Sportscenter. He is also a senior writer for *ESPN The Magazine* and a columnist for *ESPN.com*. He has authored two books: *America's Game* (2000), a three-dimensional interactive book featuring documents and photographs from the National Baseball Hall of Fame, and *Is This a Great Game or What: From A-Rod's Heart to Zim's Head: My 25 Years in Baseball* (2007).

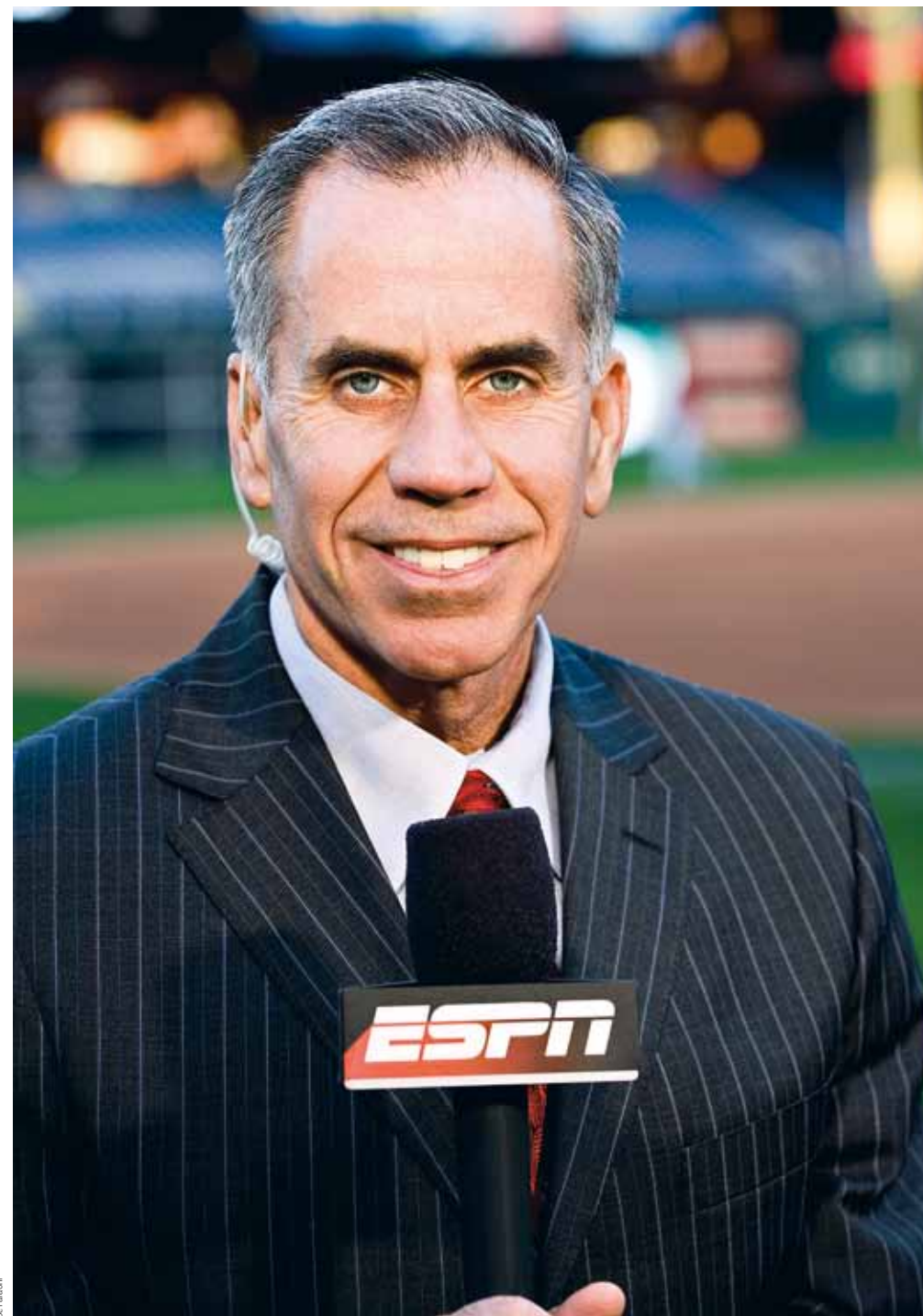
After graduating from Walter Johnson, Kurkjian accepted that his baseball career was over before it even began. So it was only inevitable that he would end up with a career as a baseball writer – one that has seen him cover over 3,000 games, and every World Series and All-Star game for the last 30 years. Kurkjian is the best at what he does, which is one of the reasons that in July of last year, it led to his own bobblehead night in his hometown for the Bethesda Big Train. The bobblehead shows Kurkjian standing on the pitchers mound, looking as sharp in a clay suit as he usually does on TV.

He says that baseball is the hardest game to play – in the world – and he is always eager to argue his point. But be warned. Anyone willing to argue should get ready for a historical, statistical and anecdotal mutilation, and invariably, end up accepting Babe Ruth as their lord and savior.

“I’m not sure if anybody enjoys baseball and its storytelling, history and traditions more than Tim,” says Karl Ravech, host of *Baseball Tonight* for the last 16 years. “I feel honored to work with somebody who takes his job seriously and respects the game the way he does. He is very unique in his ability to put accomplishments into historical perspective with clear and open eyes. His context and frame of reference in regards to baseball makes you think that he can easily be the next commissioner. He’s such a cheerleader of the sport and really has a love affair with the game.” When Kurkjian talks about baseball, his storytelling and excitement for it can make lining chalk along the foul lines sound as exhilarating as Game 7 of the World Series.

“There is not anyone I respect more in this business than Tim,” says Buck Showalter, manager of the Baltimore Orioles. “He’s one of my favorite people in the game. Tim’s a grinder, he works hard, and is very knowledgeable and passionate about the game, and people respect the heck out of him.”

Kurkjian also shares stories of former Armenian ballplayers Jim Essian, and 1987 Cy Young award winner Steve



Bedrosian and being mistaken for fellow reporter Armen Keteyian by two Armenian waiters at a Seattle restaurant during the 2001 All Star game. One day in the Boston Red Sox clubhouse, former manager Jimmy Williams dropped some “double batch of pilaf” knowledge on Kurkjian. Evidently, Williams had spent a summer in Fresno with an Armenian roommate and learned the recipe. “Remember, two batches, two pots!” Williams advised.

Kurkjian lists his top three hitters of all time as Babe Ruth, Willie Mays and Ty Cobb, in that order. Walter Johnson, Cy Young and Lefty Grove round out his top three on the mound. “In baseball, more than any other sport, true greatness transcends all eras,” he says. Babe Ruth, who had 94 wins, 107 complete games, and 17 shutouts as a *pitcher* before writing the record books with 714 career home runs and an almanac of other batting records, is his *crème de la crème*.

“Babe Ruth, is the greatest player of all time, and there really is no close second. After Jackie Robinson, he was the most important player in league history,” says Kurkjian. “I find it interesting that people find him to be this big fat guy who couldn’t run and ate hot dogs in the middle of the game, when the real truth is, he was a fabulous athlete. In his prime, he was certainly bigger, better, faster, and stronger than anyone who played in his era.” Although Armenians love beer, hot dogs and women as much as Ruth did, they are largely a minority when it comes to baseball. In Armenia, until this day, you still can’t find a baseball field. Stickball games on street corners are simply non-existent. The only hint of the game is a bat, and that doesn’t even count since it’s a universal form of self-defense – or assault. Just ask Juan Marichal. When speaking of eras, the conversation quickly moves into steroids – which has clouded the game over the last 20 years. As a Hall of Fame voter for the last 21 years, Kurkjian finds himself caught in a pickle as to how to clean up a mess created by the Sultan of Swats of the late 20th and 21st centuries with Barry Bonds, Jose Canseco, McGwire and hundreds of others. “It is the single hardest issue I have dealt with in my years of covering baseball.

and Rafael Palmeiro, players with dirty marks. The last five years, he has ended up being the minority as it’s been pretty clear how voters feel about steroids. He believes that an awful lot of players were doing something illegal in the steroid era and to just single out a few and say “we are going to punish you guys” just doesn’t seem right to him. At this point, he’ll vote for Bonds and Roger Clemens for the 2013 class, too, as they both begin perjury trials for lying to Congress. “Keeping them out of the Hall of Fame is the easy way out. As we try to examine who was doing what, it makes for a very cumbersome issue. Whether it’s corked bats or scuffed balls, it seems to me that people have been cheating in baseball since its first day 150 years ago.” Kurkjian is not in favor of labeling steroids users as ‘cheaters’ and simply ending the debatable problem by putting asterisks next to records. What he is in favor of is attaching a story to each controversy and letting fans make up their own minds. “If we start putting asterisks now for all of our sluggers, every single page is going to have about 20 asterisks on it,” he says. “This era’s debate should be in the hands of the fans. There is no way around it.” Last year, an end to a record era also came to a somber close for Kurkjian –

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I don’t even pretend to have the right answer. Given all the factors and how little we know about steroids, and what exactly it does to a ballplayer, in a lack of evidence and proof on the highest level, I find myself voting for these guys,” he says. “I am the son of a mathematician and am married to a lawyer. I need more proof than what we have now as to exactly what steroids do.” Kurkjian said that in ballots of years past, he’s voted for the likes of McGwire

and it had nothing to do with anything happening on the field. Frankly, it was the greatest baseball streak never heard of. After 21 years, Ironman Kurkjian put an end to a streak when he stopped clipping every newspaper box score of every game into a spiral notebook, “a daily task that I’ve estimated, at roughly 15 minutes per day, has cost me 40 days of my truly pathetic life,” he says. Alas, the Cal Ripken Jr. of sports section clippings finally took a day off – for good.

It was a sad reality for Kurkjian to accept, who prior to joining ESPN in 1998, was a reporter for *Sports Illustrated* and several different newspapers over the years. But as it is apparent now, print edition newspapers are in a neck-and-neck fight with the fax machine to see which will be on the extinct list first. At 54-years-old, Tim would rather not deal with all the technological hullabaloo of today, so he’s dipping his feet in very slowly. In March, he started tweeting at “*Kurkjian_ESPN*”, where you can read such updates like “(Stephen Strasburg) has 6-pac abs. And he is so much more comfortable this spring,” referring to the acclaimed Washington Nationals pitcher, and “Talked to Yogi Berra today. He had 23 RBI’s in a doubleheader in minor leagues.” “It’s troublesome for a 54-year old guy who grew up learning there is a certain way to journalism, and now clearly, the rules have changed with (the Internet and social media),” he says. “There used to be a day 30 years ago when I was working for a newspaper where you had a story at 10 o’clock at night and you could keep it quiet for the next couple of hours – and you had a story the following morning that was going to live all day. Now, it simply doesn’t work that way. It’s a 24-hour news cycle that never ends. It’s very exciting in a way, and I really like it, but yet, it worries me that we’re not interested in journalism today and getting things right, but rather, just being first.” “There’s no meanness to him; he’s very factual,” says Showalter. “When he walks into a locker room, a lot of people have respect for him because they know he cares about being right.” Whatever the next media curveball may be, be assured that Kurkjian will be sitting right on top of it, connecting with a microphone and notebook better than anyone else in his league today. “I have the greatest job in the world, and I know people say stuff like that all the time, but I really mean it, and I really do appreciate it,” he says. “I understand how lucky I am to be where I am. I get to go to baseball games, and talk and write about it for a living. How many people would love to do that?” ■