

The Yankee who never was:

John Malangone suffered as horrible secret from youth ruined his baseball career, and a good chunk of his life

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NEW YORK — It's all these years later and John Malangone is back in the neighborhood, his thick catcher's hands clamped around a knife and a fork, his breakfast disappearing as if he were being charged by the second.

He is sitting by the window of the Delightful coffee shop. Malangone doesn't need to eat in gulps anymore, the same way he no longer has to run or hide. But some habits are tough to break.

Some wounds are slow to heal, which is exactly the point one of the greatest Yankees to never make it is discussing.

"Guilt is a terrible thing," John Malangone said. "Nobody can live with guilt."

John Malangone is a high school dropout, having spent four years in the same hammer and nails class at Benjamin Franklin High School. He did not even learn to read and write until he was in his 40s. But he might as well have a doctorate on the subject of guilt, which nearly killed him and certainly killed his baseball career.

"He could run, he could throw, he could hit and he had power up the ying yang," said John Blanchard, his Yankee contemporary and fellow catcher. "He definitely had all the talent to be a longtime catcher in the major leagues."

"I could never figure out why a guy that great couldn't reach the potential he had," said Ron Weiss, Malangone's closest friend.

Thirty years ago, Weiss played sandlot ball with Malangone. Two years ago, Weiss finally did figure it out, because Malangone told him. Told him the terrible truth, the secret he had locked away for more than 50 years, hoping it would go away, only to learn the hard way that personal demons have no expiration date.

"You can shut off a TV, but you can't shut off a picture in your mind," Malangone said. "I was damaged merchandise. I never could've made it to the big leagues. Never. A voice would talk to me and say, 'You're not worthy. You don't deserve that fame and fortune.'"

What did John Malangone (MAL-an-go-nee) think he deserved? How low do you care to go? Suicide? He thought of that plenty of times. What could his own life be worth, after he had taken somebody else's? After what happened that summer day on a sidewalk off East 114th Street, where John Malangone accidentally killed his best friend?

His name was Orlando Panarese. He was a blond-haired boy. "a beautiful boy," Malangone said, pronouncing the word BUE-tee-ful. John saw a picture of the face every time he walked into his grandmother's house. Orlando wasn't just his best friend, he was also his uncle, his mother's little brother.

Orlando Panarese was seven when he died. Malangone was five. They were having a contest. John let fly with a homemade javelin. It went farther than anyone could've imagined. It hit his uncle in the head. Orlando Panarese's life ended 10 days later. The neighborhood punks had a nickname for John.

"They called me 'Killer,'" Malangone said. "They'd see me coming and say, 'Hey, kill anybody lately?'"

The accident occurred in early July 1937. Malangone, 62, has flashbacks still, searing shreds of recall that won't let him be: of the javelin in flight, of the striped socks Orlando was wearing, of the way Orlando looked in the coffin. "It will rock you," Malangone said of the flashbacks.

The family grieved a long time. It was a steadfastly silent process. "We didn't speak one word of it," said Josephine Malangone, 83, John's mother, as she sat in the dining room of her home in the Bronx. "If you talked about it, we thought you were going to get sick."

Lake some unseen tank of toxic gas, the trauma kept pouring poison into every corner of Malangone's life.

He lost his hearing for a time after the accident. He started to speak only in Italian. He would throw himself on the bed and just lie there, saying his head hurt.

"I knew he was suffering. I could feel it," Josephine said. "But I didn't know what to do about it."

John stayed off the streets as much as possible, preferring the privacy of alleys and courtyards, anything to avoid being seen, or hearing his nickname. Learning was all but impossible. The only relief he found was in exertion. So he ran, every place he could. He would throw things at targets on solitary walls, near the family apartment. And he would shovel coal, mountains of it, which is where his meaty forearms come from.

He played ball with his buddy, the late Paulie Tine. Paulie had a disfigured face. With John's psychological disfiguration, they felt a strong tug and became inseparable. They would throw and hit, and in no time at all it was clear John Malangone had great ability, and a remarkable arm.

"He was just a little kid and he could throw a ball over a building," his mother said.

One day in the spring of 1950, Malangone was a batboy in a sandlot game at Jefferson Park, across the street from the apartment. He had played a bit for Benjamin Franklin High, but his learning disability made it impossible for him to stay eligible.

Before the game, the 17-year-old Malangone was in right field, firing balls to home plate on the fly, each white blur making a big hard hop at the end. Along the third-base line was Paul Krichell, the renowned Yankee scout and the man who signed Lou Gehrig. Krichell was there to check out other prospects, but couldn't stop looking at the burly kid in right field. The scout invited Malangone to the Stadium, where he worked out for two weeks. Soon, the neighborhood was abuzz over the limo in front of the Malangone's tenement, the Yankee brass coming to sign John Malangone to a professional baseball contract.

Malangone was in the organization for 10 seasons. Converted from pitcher to catcher a year after signing, he hit more than 100 home runs in the minors, and batted close to .300. In 1955, Casey Stengel said he thought the 5-10, 210-pound Malangone had a shot to be the successor to Yogi Berra.

The only problem was that Malangone would not let himself succeed. "Every time I got close, I would self-destruct," he said. Just about every year he would go AWOL from his team for a week or two. Because he couldn't read, he was continually running afloat of team rules about dress code, reporting times, etc.

He volunteered for front-line duty in the Army during the Korean War, thinking that serving his country would be a good way to die. Malangone wound up rescuing a drowning soldier during training and winning a medal, and also became an army heavyweight boxing champion. But he returned to baseball an unchanged man.

He found occasional refuge in inappropriate pranks, being the center of attention. Johnny Kucks, the pitcher, remembers Malangone as a "care-free, laughable guy." In spring training one year, Malangone went to bat with a rake in his hand. "Everybody just broke up, but I don't think it scored too many points with management," Blanchard said. "You just don't do that when you're trying to make the big club."

There were other instances of erratic behavior. In 1962, playing for Three Rivers in Canada, Malangone ran to the front of the

bus and implored the driver to pull over. The bus had just passed a church. Malangone felt one of his spells coming on, as they did about once a month. The best way for him to get through them was to pray.

"Without my faith, I never would've made it," he said.

At one point, Krichell became so concerned that he asked Malangone if he needed help, if he wanted to talk. Malangone just ran away. He loved Krichell. "He was a brilliant man, a bue-tee-ful man," said Malangone, but there was no way he could talk to him. It was a secret.

Malangone got married and he and his wife, Rosemary, moved to Little Ferry, N.J., and raised five children. He retired from pro ball in 1960, played some sandlot ball for a few years, and worked two jobs, one in Sears' automotive center, the other in the city's water department. By his own reckoning, he was not much of a presence as a father or husband. He worked long hours. He was moody. His life was a chronic, futile flight from his constant companions: fear and shame.

"He was always in gear, always rushing," Rosemary said. "He never put concentration into anything." Once he went to see a therapist, but all that came of that visit was that Malangone went home and took a bat to every trophy, picture, ball and baseball keepsake he could find.

Just before Malangone's father died seven years ago, they had a final bedside visit. The father said, "John, you never forgot, did you?"

The son shook his head. "I cried a river that day," Malangone said.

It wasn't until late in 1992 that John Malangone fully let go of his horrible secret. He and Ron Weiss, his old sandlot buddy and a retired physical education teacher, had gotten back in touch. They were eating tuna sandwiches near the Sears' in Paramus. Weiss asked if Malangone would coach his son, Aron. They got talking. Who knows what moved Malangone to go right at his pain, 55 years later? "I was ripe," he said. He told Ron Weiss everything, right down to the striped socks and the coffin.

"It was like four tons coming off my back," Malangone said.

Weeks later, he talked to his mother's sister, Yolanda, then sat down with his mother and they let it all out, at last. His mother was crying. She had loved her little brother so much.

She was so sorry her son had suffered for so long. She filled up with love and compassion for her boy. He was 60 then, but may as well have been six for the way he felt, remorse and relief rising out of him like hot lava.

"I still go to bed worrying about it, (thinking), 'Oh my God, why did my son have to go through this,'" Josephine said.

"After I talked to my mother it was like I could've been a tap dancer," Malangone said. He has since spoken to his wife and children. Two summers ago, he saw John Blanchard and told him.

"It's probably the saddest story I ever heard," Blanchard said.

Malangone has plenty of regrets about waiting so long, but tries not to dwell on them. One of the first things he found after sharing his secret was that he had a profound urge to play ball again. He and Weiss joined the over-40 division of the U.S. Over 30 Baseball League. They just returned from Florida, where their team won a tournament for players 45 and over. Malangone won two games pitching, and had the decisive hit in the clincher.

"He was the most excited guy in the world," said Bob DeLahant, commissioner of the U.S. Over 30 League and a player on that team.

Malangone gulped down the last bites of breakfast at the Delightful, and then he was walking three blocks south on First Avenue, to Jefferson Park. He said he was proud to walk on the street now.

It was a cold and windy day. The Jefferson field was closed for repairs. Malangone and Weiss wanted to play some ball. They squeezed through a rip in the fence, holding it open for a visitor, and then they started throwing the ball around and taking a little batting practice. Malangone clamped his catcher's hands around a bat and he smacked a few line drives, and then he put the bat down and started throwing. That was always what he loved the most. Throwing. After a handful of warmups, the ball was coming hard and it still had plenty of hop at the end.

It was nice to imagine it was something like the hop Paul Krichell had seen 44 years before. His arm felt strong and his mind felt free, and it wasn't hard to see the lightness in the cinder-block body of John Malangone. On a gray fall day, he was throwing strikes and smiling after almost every one.

"It's a beautiful thing, to play again," he said.