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 hit-
ting .320 when he walked away from the game. He was sick of living 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 atten-
tion with a 471 average the following season. He was all-conference, all-American, and captain his senior sea-
son. “He was just a natural hitter, and he’s always been a great hitter,” said Jim Gugliotti, Legion team-
mate and Southington’s current American Legion base-
ball 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 condi-
tion as an athlete 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 sen-
ior 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 perfor-
ance for Banner. A disturbing thought would pop into his head, and it became a struggle to think about anything else. This was the start of a long, painful jour-
ney that lasted for more than two decades.

Too ashamed to admit it, he suffered silently while teammates and coaches offered up and solutions at the plate. “I’m proud of myself because I had this problem on my mind constant-
ly—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 recog-
nized, myself, how foolish it seems, but I couldn’t stop it.”

OCD is a debilitating condition that affects about two percent of the popula-
tion. It is not well recognized now but was even less understood in 1978. Sufferers get bombarded by recurrent thoughts or impulses that could mani-
fest into compulsive actions like repetitive hand-washing or checking and rechecking doors or alarm clocks. It’s caused by a chemical imbal-
ance, 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, nick-

called “Pure-O” for “Purified Obsessional OCD”, is the kind that Banner felt, and it can be debilitating. It’s called

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.

Jim Gugliotti, Southington American Legion baseball coach

Athlete

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

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. My stats are better than two decades. Banner still remembers that rainy day in Durham, NC, when he finally had enough. Even though he loved baseball, the undiag-

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