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| 00:00:00 | Music | Transition | Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue. |
| 00:00:01 | Promo | Promo | **Speaker**: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.<br><br>[Music fades out.] |
| 00:00:13 | Music | Transition | "Huddle Formation" from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out. |
| 00:00:21 | Jesse | Host | It's *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. This next interview is about Rickey Henderson. Few people are more beloved in Oakland, California, than Rickey. He was raised there. And in a professional career that spanned almost 25 years, Henderson played 12 for the Athletics in four different stints. He was probably the best leadoff hitter ever to play the game. He holds the record for stolen bases at a now nearly unbeatable, 1406. He scored more runs than any player ever. He was, in short, one of the greatest ever to play the game. In his new book, *Rickey: The Life and Legend of an American Original*, Howard Bryant looks at what made Henderson so great and how his childhood in Oakland helped shape him.<br><br>In telling the story of Rickey, Bryant also tells a story about the history of baseball: how players began to realize their true value as entertainers and how Black players came to assert themselves as stars in the game. It's a great book about a baseball legend.<br><br>[Music fades in.]<br><br>Let's get into my conversation with Howard Bryant. |
| 00:01:32 | Music | Transition | Cheerful, chiming synth with a steady beat. |
| 00:01:36 | Jesse | Host | Howard Bryant, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show. |
| 00:01:39 | Howard Bryant | Guest | Oh, Jesse, thank you for having me. It's great. |
| 00:01:42 | Jesse | Host | So, Rickey Henderson was a great baseball player, but maybe you could characterize for me how great a baseball player he was. |
| 00:01:51 | Howard | Guest | Well, Rickey defies definition in so many ways, because he really is a unicorn. People have been asking me after this book came out—and while I was working on it, as well—what Rickey's legacy was. And I said, "I'm not sure that's the right word!" At one point, I think he had a legacy, because there were players who came along inspired by him, who tried to play similar games to him, who tried to follow in those footsteps. But now, he's a unicorn. Baseball is not played the same way where Rickey could dominate a game as an offensive player whether he was—especially when he was on base, when he was in scoring position, when he was at the plate, and played with a certain level of style and swagger that baseball has been discouraging since the 19th century, but he defied that convention.<br><br>Baseball is not the same game. Baseball is a sport that is risk averse. And Rickey was—what's the best way to put it? He was, uh, risk-active. He was absolutely somebody— |
| 00:02:52 | Jesse | Host | [Chuckles.] Riskful. |
| 00:02:53 | Howard | Guest | He was—he looked forward to risk. And I think the thing about him was the way that he surprised people in the way you could |

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| | | | dominate at a game. Baseball is one of those games like golf. You're not supposed to be able to master it. It's a game of failure. It's one of the games where if you get a hit three out of ten times, you're doing great. If you make three of your ten free throws, you're not even in the sport anymore. You're on the bench. But when he was right—when he played at his peak, it seemed as though he could do whatever he wanted on the baseball diamond. And that was just very, very unique. |
| 00:03:29 | Jesse | Host | He also was, in that vein, the rare baseball player who felt like he could control a game. You know, there are starting pitchers who can be the protagonist of a baseball game, but they play once or twice a week. It's very rare for anyone else to feel like they really matter on the field throughout a game. [Chuckles.] 'Cause baseball players take turns. |
| 00:03:53 | Howard | Guest | Well, that's right. I was actually having that conversation with a friend of mine this afternoon, or when we were—we were talking about the NBA finals, talking about how basketball is a best player wins game. There is only ten guys on the court, and you play offense and defense simultaneously, and if you're head and shoulders above everyone else, you can effect all of the action. Baseball's not like that. If Clayton Kershaw is your best player, he's only on the field 20% of the entire season. And if Rickey Henderson is your best player and it's two outs in the bottom of the ninth of the world series in game seven and the number eight hitter is at bat, then Rickey's a spectator like everybody else.<br><br>In baseball, you have to wait your turn and you have to watch. But in Rickey's case, he did believe that he was the kind of player who could always effect the action, even when he wasn't at bat. When he was in the field there was always something he was gonna be able to do to change the momentum of a game. And it's statistically not true, but anecdotally it was completely true, because he really did effect how pitchers pitched. Because they knew at some point he was going to come up, and if he actually got on base then he was effecting the action for the next hitters that came up. |
| 00:05:06 | Jesse | Host | Rickey Henderson returned to the Oakland As, the team with which he had started his career, in 1989. And I was eight years old. My dad was an As fan. He really couldn't be more vivid in my mind's eye. But I think that, for someone who didn't see him, someone who wasn't a baseball fan, it would be hard to overstate that his unicorn quality extended to his manner and his body and the way he looked playing baseball. Can you describe just how he was built and how he played? The manner in which he played. |
| 00:05:49 | Howard | Guest | Yeah. And I think that that's such a great entry point, because 1989 is the supernova year. 1989, '90, '91. This is when, if you're eight years old and a baseball fan, he's going to captivate you. And it sounds like he absolutely captivated <u>you</u>! And in 1989, Rickey Henderson was considered a loser. He had been with the New York Yankees for the previous four and a half seasons. And he had gained that reputation that you really do not want, as a professional athlete. The kind of guy who didn't really wanna be there, who wasn't really excited about the sport, who was more concerned with money. And we'll get to the money of the 1980s in a bit, I imagine. |
| 00:06:33 | Jesse | Host | And this was one of the only times in the history of the New York Yankees that they had been bad. |

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| 00:06:37 | Howard | Guest | That they had not won. And the rule of thumb was if you were a Yankee, to be a true Yankee, you had to win the World Series. And the Yankees hadn't even made the playoffs when Rickey was there. And so, people looked at Rickey as though he was the guy who put up a lot of big numbers but didn't win. And he had a lot to prove when he was traded to Oakland in mid-June of 1989—that he could be a championship player, that he was somebody that you could win with. Because the New York experiment had essentially failed, even though he had put up pretty good numbers. And so, for Rickey, you're looking at a player who's about 5'10", built like a football player, always wanted to be a football player, believed he was going to be one of the great running backs of all time had he chosen football. |
| 00:07:25 | Jesse | Host | Really built like a running back. I mean, like—<br><br>[Howard agrees.] |
| 00:07:31 | Howard | Guest | Giant thighs. [Chuckles.] Just half of his weight in his thighs. Exactly. A 28 waist and 33-inch thighs. Right? He's one of those players. And he's got—you know, world-class speed, and he's got the unbelievable ability to read a pitcher. And the minute that pitcher's about to go to home plate, he would take off for second. And in a very short period of time, within his first three years or so, people already—are already calling him the greatest base stealer of all time. He's already considered the best leadoff hitter of all time. And this is—he hasn't even been in the league ten years. And yet, people still think he's a loser.<br><br>Generationally, when you go back to the 1980s, you have to—and this is one of the things that I really wanted to get across in this book—is remembering or thinking about how when Rickey came up, the contracts were just now starting to become really big money. It's the first ten years of free agency, and the public really could not handle that. The public did not like the fact that these athletes were suddenly—they were once making three, four, five times what the average American was making. Now, they're making 50 times what the average American is making. And now they're making a gazillion times more. It's not even in the same stratosphere.<br><br>And so, Rickey embodies all of this. And now, Rickey also embodies this sort of unapologetically Black baseball style that comes straight from Oakland. And on top of that, he's one of these people—unlike the tradition of baseball players, whether you're Black or White, but especially if you were Black in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, to be really deferential about the game. Rickey was unafraid to tell you how good he was. So, this entire—this entire combination made him one of the more unpopular players in the game, despite his unbelievable ability. |
| 00:09:21 | Jesse | Host | Even more still to get into with Howard Bryant after the break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR. |
| 00:09:30 | Music | Transition | Thumpy synth with light vocalizations. |
| 00:09:34 | Jesse | Host | It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Howard Bryant. Howard is a writer whose work has appeared on ESPN and here, on NPR. His newest book is about the life and extraordinary talent of baseball legend, Rickey Henderson. It's |

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| | | | called *Rickey: The Life and Legend of an American Original*. Let's get back into our conversation.<br><br>In a minute, I wanna go back to the beginning of Rickey Henderson's life and career. But I want you describe Rickey Henderson at bat. When Rickey Henderson stepped out of the on-deck circle and headed towards home plate, what did we see? |
| 00:10:14 | Howard | Guest | Well, what you saw—especially early in his career, you saw something that very few baseball watchers had ever seen. Somebody who took a long time to get to the plate. He took his own time. And the opposing team would look and go, "What's taking him so long?" He just walked at his own pace. And then, he had his own ritual where he got into the batter's box and he—you know—kicked around and moved and got into position. And pitchers, you have to remember—for non-baseball fans out there, pitchers <u>hate</u> this. They think it's disrespectful. They think that you're showing them up. They think you're trying to send them a message that they're working on your schedule, even though they have the ball.<br><br>And normally, what happens when that happens is somebody throws the ball at your head. At least, in the old days. That's what they would do. They used to say, you know, they'll make you skip rope. They'll throw the ball down at your feet. They'll throw the ball at you. So, Rickey would <u>immediately</u> just anger so many pitchers. And Dennis Eckersley, a Hall of Fame pitcher, said the first time he saw him, he's looking with a few choice expletives. "What the—you know—is that? Who is this guy?" And he's a rookie. And remember the hazing in professional sports, especially in baseball, is extremely intense. You're supposed to be seen and not heard. And Rickey, from day one, just believed in his ability and believed that there was nobody out there that could beat him.<br><br>And then Eckersley saw it not too long before he became a superstar. Because the other thing is, you couldn't intimidate Rickey. You could throw the ball at his head five times, and he's just step right back in there and beat you on the sixth time. Incredibly unique player. |
| 00:11:44 | Jesse | Host | You know, he talked to his bat, and he would hold it in front of him and look at it and hit it. And there are a lot of baseball players who seem to enact rituals before they do their thing, whether it's hitting or pitching, that seem to be driven by superstition. Rickey always just seemed to be on his own plane. And in a way, that seemed like the most upsetting thing to the opponents. It was not that Rickey was, you know, shoving a thumb up their nose, but rather that Rickey truly did not care about what they were up to. 'Cause he was— |
| 00:12:20 | Howard | Guest | That's right. He was completely unacknowledging everything. And he was. They used to call it planet Rickey. Rickey was completely engaged in what he had to do. And it wasn't just the opposing team that thought it was disrespectful. It was his own teammates. His teammates hated the fact that Rickey would talk to the fans while the game was going on. He'd be in the batter's box. I'm sorry, not batter's box. He'd be in the on-deck circle. And instead of watching the pitcher and looking at what he throws and trying to get an advantage and being in the game, he would chat it up with the fans. And they—and the fans loved it! |

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| | | | And one of the things about this book that I really wanted to get at, what I really wanted to try to explore, was the fact that Rickey was a made-for-TV guy. The baseball—the roots of baseball are newspaper. The newspaper columnist controlled everything. It was a baseball radio game. And in a lot of ways, the sport still hasn't quite translated. And we're in 2022. It hasn't really translated to the fact—or transitioned into the fact that it's not a writer's game, and it's not a radio game as much anymore. The game has to have style. The game has to have—you watch a basketball game and a guy dunks and he does his little histrionics and then runs back down court. Nobody really says anything. In baseball, you show <u>any</u> sort of personality and now everybody wants to fight! And then make a big deal out of it. |
| 00:13:37 | Jesse | Host | Let's talk about—I don't remember what catcher it is. And it might be an apocryphal story, but there's this famous story that somebody—let's say Carlton Fisk, a legendary catcher of the 1980s—said that Rickey Henderson had a tell when he was on base. Which is to say that this catcher, we're calling it Carlton Fisk, could always see when Rickey was about to run. And he said, "I always knew when Rickey was about to run, because he'd be looking at the pitcher and he would wiggle his fingers in his batting gloves. And the only problem was, there was nothing I could do about it."<br><br>[Howard confirms with a laugh.]<br><br>[Laughing.] And I think, you know, it undersells Rickey's extraordinary skill as a base stealer, but it captures what was incredible about Rickey Henderson when he was on base, which was that he seemed to be—you know, he seemed to be controlling the game. He seemed to be playing his own game and seemed entirely fearless, to the extent that he could wiggle his fingers when he was gonna go and it wouldn't matter. [Laughs.] |
| 00:14:47 | Howard | Guest | Yeah. And that's what Reggie Jackson said.<br><br>[Jesse affirms.]<br><br>The catcher knew that Rickey was going. The pitcher knew Rickey was going. Everybody in both dugouts knew Rickey was going and everybody in the stands knew Rickey was going. And they still couldn't stop him. |
| 00:15:00 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:15:01 | Clip | Clip | **Announcer**: Having come from behind a three—a one-nothing.<br><br>[The crowd erupts into cheers.]<br><br>That's it! Rickey goes! The pitch—take it, he's gonna have it! He does! Rickey Henderson, no contest! Steals third base! Jerks the bag from its horns and holds it aloft, representing number 939! |
| 00:15:20 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:15:21 | Jesse | Host | Yeah. And the picture in my mind's eye of him on the bases is the intensity of his stare at the pitcher and the moment that he turned to run to second base. That he had this focus that was so |

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| | | | unbelievable in his eyes. And he had this moment where he seemed to be going from standing still to Carl Lewis just with the turn of his head. |
| 00:15:49 | Howard | Guest | Yeah. That's one of the things about base stealing that is such an interesting piece of the technique. You can be really, really fast. Rubén Sierra, the old—you know—who turned into a big, muscle-bound guy and was traded for Jose Canseco at one point in his career, to Oakland in '92—he was really fast when he was a young player with the Texas Rangers. But he didn't really hit top speed until he had eight or nine, ten, strides. If that's the case, you're probably not gonna be a great base stealer. Rickey had immediate burst where Rickey could take a short lead and he could hit full speed in three or four steps.<br><br>It's acceleration. It's what made him such a great base stealer, in addition to his ability to read the pitcher, to get that extra advantage. |
| 00:16:32 | Jesse | Host | Well, let's talk about Oakland. Because the Rickey Henderson story's undoubtedly an Oakland story. He is one of the greatest sports heroes in Oakland history, as a native Oaklander and as a four-time [laughs] Oakland Athletic. Is that right? Four, right? Not five. |
| 00:16:49 | Howard | Guest | Four times. Four stints. Yes. |
| 00:16:51 | Jesse | Host | Four different times. There was a brief period where they were talking about him signing to the As one last time before he retired, but he did not want to retire. |
| 00:17:00 | Howard | Guest | [Chuckles.] Of course. Rickey never officially retired anywhere. I remember when I was interviewing him for the book, I said to him, "You know, Rickey, you actually have never officially retired. Your last at bat was with the Dodgers in 2003, but the phone stopped ringing. You never announced your retirement. You never had a press conference."<br><br>And he was completely serious, and he shook his head and he said, "No." And he said, "I still think I could help a team."<br><br>And I said, "You're 61 years old!"<br><br>[Jesse laughs.]<br><br>This was like in—this was in 2019! |
| 00:17:28 | Jesse | Host | Oh, we love the man. So, tell me a little bit about what Oakland was like when Rickey was a kid. |
| 00:17:36 | Howard | Guest | Well, when I first started thinking about working on this book, Oakland was gonna be a central character. I always knew that. And one of the reasons why I knew Oakland was going to be central to the book was because of the Great Migration. It was the thing that I really wanted to get at in sports, because we talk about the Great Migration in so many ways. We talk about how it remade the Midwest. It remade Chicago. It remade Detroit. We talk about it on the east coast. Philadelphia. DC. New York. Even Boston. And even in Canada as well, that it was a destination for Black people to go to. And obviously, in Los Angeles as well. We talk about the unbelievable talent in Oakland, in terms of Athletics. You had Bill Russell there. The great Frank Robinson. Curt Flood. Vada Pinson. So many of these great players. |

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| | | | But we never connect the two. We never talk about the Great Migration and how it was effecting sports. How did these players get there? And so, you look at someone like Rickey. You look at that first wave of Black players that came there in the 1940s. Bill Russell from Monroe, Louisiana. Joe Morgan's from Bonham, Texas. Frank Robinson's from Beaumont, Texas. And you had all of these great players all show up in Oakland in the 1940s and 50s. And then you have the school they went to, called the school of champions. It was McClymond's High School. And they talk about all of this as thought it was the great coincidence. It wasn't coincidence; it was segregation. It was the fact that Black people moved from Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas.<br><br>People used to call Oakland New Orleans West. Because so many people from that migration were from Louisiana. And because of the racial covenants at the time in housing and in real estate, the Black people were funneled into west Oakland. And there was only one high school they were going to go to, and it was McClymond's. So, the school of champions, the creation of Oakland as this sports powerhouse is tied directly to the Great Migration. And that's what the first part of the book is really all about. And then the second wave comes—you know, just a few years later. In 1940, Oakland was 2.8% Black. By 1950, the Black population had grown 1600%. And so, the next wave of Black families that moved to Oakland contained the families of Dave Stewart, Rickey Henderson, Lloyd Moseby, Gary Pettis, Rudy—all of these great players! Willie Stargell and Tommy Harper. All of these great players, all of them all-stars. So many of them World Series players. So many of them World Series champions, once again attributable to the Great Migration.<br><br>And that was the thing that I really wanted to sort of talk about was how much Oakland was shaped by this movement. And on top of that, how much the style of Oakland comes from the migration. |
| 00:20:46 | Jesse | Host | One of the things that I thought was interesting about Rickey in the context of Oakland is here is this dude who is, you know, I think the city's greatest sports hero still. Because, you know, nobody else combined being an Oaklander and playing in Oakland and playing with an Oakland style the way that Rickey did. |
| 00:21:08 | Howard | Guest | Yeah. Maybe Marshawn Lynch, in the modern times. |
| 00:21:10 | Jesse | Host | I was about to say, with a tip of the cap to Marshawn Lynch. If Marshawn Lynch had played his whole career for the Raiders.<br><br>[Howard agrees.]<br><br>And you know, Rickey also famously owns half of Oakland. You know? You don't—you know you're from the Bay Area when you know somebody whose landlord is Rickey Henderson. But Rickey… fit a little uncomfortably into the city. And grew up feeling like he was not the right kind of slick to be an Oakland City dude. And I thought that was a really interesting tension that I had never considered, that in a—you know, surrounded by people who had grown up in the city, that he is someone who I'd come to it, felt like he might be a country bumpkin. |
| 00:22:06 | Howard | Guest | That's funny, because I didn't know until working on the book what the timetable was. I knew Rickey was born in Chicago. I knew |

Rickey was from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. But I didn't know—I didn't know when he had come to Oakland. So, I thought he had come to Oakland much, much sooner—like when he was a baby and in first grade or something. It turns out, he got there when he was in the sixth grade. And so, when he arrived as a 10/11-year-old, he thought he was the outcast. He's like, "Everybody here was so refined." And he was used to being on his grandmother's farm in Pine Bluff. And he talked about how proper everybody spoke, and how used to being out on the farm and out in more of a rural space that now he comes to Oakland and everyone's a little fast for him. And everybody is a little bit uncomfortable. A little bit out of place.

And then he plays sports. And now, suddenly, they all wanna be around him. Once he starts playing sports, all of the discomfort disappeared. Because, as any boy knows who comes from a place where—when they're the new kid, if you can play sports, suddenly everybody likes you. And Rickey couldn't just play. Rickey was great! And now, all of the sudden, the kid that nobody was sure about is the kid everybody wants to be around. To the point where Rickey was so fast, people used to tell stories that, to work on his speed, he would race the school bus home just to see if he could beat the school bus to the next stop. And he adapted to Oakland really, really quickly and sports pretty much had everything to do with it.

00:23:41 Jesse Host I also got the impression that that and maybe a little bit of neurodivergence helped explain the way that Rickey seemed to kind of defy the categories we have in our head about star athletes in that he did truly seem to live in his own world. And he certainly believed in his own talent. But he didn't seem like—you know, he didn't seem like a big guy on campus type. In fact, kind of the opposite of that. To prove yourself on the field was a way to like remain as different as he was everywhere else.

00:24:27 Howard Guest True, but Rickey was also extremely driven, extremely competitive, and very suspicious. Very untrusting, and one of the reasons why he was so untrusting was because of those early days coming from Arkansas and being made fun of in so many ways or people thinking that they could take advantage of him. He was very, very suspicious of people. And that carried on throughout his career. He was not really close to that many players. Had a lot of people who he was friendly with. Had a lot of people who admired him and whom he admired. But best friends? Rickey's people were the kids he grew up with. He kept that group much, much closer to him than a lot of other athletes.

And that's unique, because in so many sport circumstances, especially with Black athletes, those players—when they get to the big leagues and they start making real money—they are constantly counseled to separate themselves from the communities they come from, to get away from the old neighborhood. Because now, you're the one who made it and everyone's gonna be looking at you for money. They're gonna be looking to you to house them and feed them and clothe them and everything else. And when we go out to dinner and everything, you pay for it because you're the rich one. And we need you to—you've got so much more than the rest of us; you have to be the financial engine for all of us. And these are things that Rickey had to deal with early on in his career and dealt

with it throughout his career, in terms of trying to understand that balance of how do I keep—how do I keep my inner circle close without feeling like I'm being taken advantage of?

And so, that happened really, really early for him. And these are the types of themes that really do go beyond sports for me, because I love the fact that Rickey embodied a lot of the same issues that so many people deal with in terms of being from that—you know, being from a family or being from a place where there isn't much. And then people, of course—you try to maintain those connections, and you know that you have to have a little bit of separation, because your life is so different than everybody else's. But you also don't wanna be accused of, "Hey, you forgot where you came from. You're not one of us, anymore." And Rickey balanced that really, really well. Nobody would look at Rickey Henderson and think he's not straight Oakland. He is still completely connected to that town.

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| 00:26:43 | Jesse | Host | Rickey Henderson, also a guy who never found a comfortable place in his new world. [Chuckles.] You know? |

[Howard agrees.]

Like, he certainly did on the field! As one of the greatest baseball players of all time! But you don't ever get the impression that in any clubhouse that Rickey Henderson sat in, he necessarily—he felt he belonged on something other than merit.

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| 00:27:11 | Howard | Guest | No. Absolutely right. He was very suspicious and very distant, and Rickey was aloof, and people looked at him as such. And part of the reason is because Rickey did not—you couldn't control him. He couldn't be controlled. He was not—he was not a good soldier, let's put it that way. He was not somebody—a lot of these kids get into the big leagues and they're so grateful to be there and they are deferential, and they know that all of this can be taken away in some ways. They have this childlike relationship with authority. But Rickey was a star. Rickey was one of those guys who was—he was in the Muhammad Ali mode. |

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. You pay me, because I make you even more money." Completely aware of his worth. And that is not necessarily a heroic thing. It's a combative thing. It's a defiant thing. And so, Rickey would fight with his teams about how much money he felt like he would make. And Rickey was very, very much aware of the salary structure in sports and who was making money and who wasn't and why. And was very vocal about it. And a lot of his teammates that I had spoken to had said this is one of the reasons why people didn't like him as much, because he was willing to advocate for himself in a way that so many other players weren't. He looked like he was selfish. Maybe he was selfish. He was—it's a selfish game. Baseball has always been the most individual of team sports. When I'm up to bat, nobody else can help me. There is no help defense. When I'm out there and a flyball comes to center field but the best player is the catcher, he can't help me.

Nobody can catch the ball for you. Nobody can hit for you. And Rickey was one of those guys, especially in those early years when the money began to grow. He was very, very unafraid and he was not shy about telling everybody, "Hey, I'm a million-dollar player. I

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| | | | deserve to be making x amount of money." And in the 1980s, people of a given generation certainly know how much labor strife existed in baseball. They didn't wanna hear it! They didn't wanna hear a guy making $850,000 that he was being underpaid and disrespected. And back then, when you go through the day by days, you see that people made a bigger deal about a guy making $900,000 than they do today with guys making $40,000,000. Because they're just used to it now.<br><br>But back then, when it was brand new? 1979, Rickey comes into the league, he's making $17,000. By 1983, he's making 850. And so, the newspaper columnists and the fans would be like, "How much do you want? How much is enough?" And his attitude is, well, I'm not comparing myself to the plumber or the electrician or the traveling salesman. I'm comparing myself to the guy on the field with me who's making more money than me and I'm better than. |
| 00:29:54 | Jesse | Host | We've got more to get into with Howard Bryant. After the break, we'll talk about Rickey Henderson's legendary Hall of Fame speech. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR. |
| 00:29:05 | Promo | Clip | **Music**: Gentle harp music.<br><br>**Janet Varney**: Hi. I'm Janet Varney and just like you, I survived high school. And we're not alone! On my podcast, *The JV Club*, I invite some of my friends to share the highs and lows of their teen years. Like moments with Aisha Tyler.<br><br>**Aisha Tyler**: But when you're a kid, the stakes are just pretty low! Go to school, try not to get in trouble, get laid.<br><br>**Janet**: Jameela Jamil.<br><br>**Jameela Jamil**: I watched television probably every waking hour during that time, when I was [censored]faced on medicine.<br><br>**Janet**: And Dave Holmes.<br><br>**Dave Holmes**: We talked and talked and then everybody left. It was just us two and I was like, "I love you."<br><br>**Janet**: Learn how you too can be a functioning adult after the drama and heartbreak of high school. Every week on *The JV Club with Janet Varney*. Find it on Maximum Fun or wherever you get your podcasts! This is a judgement free show.<br><br>[Music fades out.] |
| 00:30:52 | Music | Transition | Thumpy synth with light vocalizations. |
| 00:30:56 | Jesse | Host | This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Howard Bryant. He's the author of a new book about Rickey Henderson. Let's get back into our conversation.<br><br>I was really struck by a piece that you excerpted early on in the book. I think it's Rickey's second year with the As. And Peter Gammons, who was a *National* writer out of Boston—is still working today, writing for *The Athletic* these days—he wrote this piece describing Rickey Henderson as the new Willie Mays. And I thought, gosh. Well, you know, here's Willie Mays, literally the |

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| | | | greatest baseball player of all time and a guy who was—is, still alive—legendarily genial and polite, even though maybe that is not a full representation of who he is as a human being, but certainly someone who was able to maintain a reputation as the most genial human being in the history of the world, even in the face of barely post-integration baseball and the culture around it. Right?<br><br>And I thought, here's Rickey Henderson and Barry Bonds, these two kind of parallel figures. Barry's godfather is Willie Mays, and his dad is Bobby Bonds, who had previously been the next Willie Mays. You know. And had, you know, been an alcoholic and been unable to quite make it to what he could've been, talent-wise. Here's Rickey Henderson, who's just completely sui generis. You know what I mean? [Chuckling.] Like, completely his own dude. And like, why would—why would either of those dudes trust any of the people in that clubhouse to tell their story? And why would either of those dudes trust any of the people in that clubhouse to compare them to the greatest baseball player of all time in a way that was fair to them or made their lives better? [Chuckles.] |
| 00:33:02 | Howard | Guest | They wouldn't! And you could see it. And especially if you're untrusting in the first place. And I think that it's—what people don't realize enough about a baseball clubhouse, it is not necessarily a friendly place. As Joe Morgan used to say all the time, baseball is only fun when you're really good at it. Otherwise, people are really concentrating on everything you cannot do. You concentrate on what you cannot do. Because no matter how much money you make, at your very best you're gonna get a hit three out of ten times. That 70% failure rate is not commensurate with all the money you're making. It's a really hard place to be.<br><br>And so, with Rickey, that's the arc of the book! That is really one of the things that I wanted to really, really explore, which was the how do you go from being this very suspicious, very unpopular, very disliked character throughout most of your career that people underestimated because they disliked you so much? How do you go to where you are now, where everybody wants to celebrate you and people love you and people remember the nostalgia? They think about you with nostalgia, and they don't think about you in all the different ways that they didn't like you? What is that arc? Explain that narrative. And I think it's a very American thing. I think it's very—it's that American thing where you last long enough and suddenly people begin to be wistful about you. |
| 00:34:30 | Jesse | Host | I think it's also fair to say that the same racism that animated the hatred that Rickey got through much of his career animated the—you know, in a maybe somewhat less malicious way, the kind of paternalistic, cutesy revamping of his story. You know, I'm sure Satchel Paige had to live out his days with the same thing, although he seemed to have chosen it for himself more so. But like— |
| 00:35:03 | Howard | Guest | It becomes a persona. |
| 00:35:05 | Jesse | Host | Yeah, and I think that—you know—as pernicious as it is for Rickey to have been accused of being a malingerer because he wanted to take a day off every once in a while as the fastest guy ever, 'cause his hamstring hurt, I kind of think that the same stuff animates the laughing about Rickey speaking in the third person. Or the laughing about Rickey not remembering people that he played with or |

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| | | | whatever cute thing that people joke about Rickey Henderson now, that feels just as suffused with racism as the other stuff does, to me. |
| 00:35:41 | Howard | Guest | Well, and that's the reason why Rickey—in his Hall of Fame speech—worked so hard on getting that speech right. He walked into the Hall of Fame when he was inducted in 2009—he walked into the induction proceedings believing that people were going to that to laugh at him. That they were—you know, people talked about it. "Oh, Rickey just got into the Hall of Fame. This is gonna be the greatest speech of all time!" Because they remember 1991, where Rickey insulted Lou Brock by saying, "Today, I'm the greatest of all time." And they were waiting for Rickey to stumble. |
| 00:36:17 | Jesse | Host | Specifically, by correctly identifying that he was the greatest of all time. [Laughs.] |
| 00:36:21 | Howard | Guest | Exactly! He didn't show the deference and class that you're supposed to. I mean, Lou Brock flew out there to celebrate this moment and he didn't have to do it. And with Lou Brock standing five feet away from him, Rickey did his Muhammad Ali thing and said, "I'm the best! I've been saying I'm the best since forever, and now statistically it's true." |
| 00:36:36 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:36:37 | Clip | Clip | [Applause from the crowd.]<br><br>**Rickey Henderson**: In closing, I would like to say my favorite player—my favorite hero was Muhammad Ali.<br><br>[Scattered laughter and applause.]<br><br>He said at one time, quote, "I am the greatest!" End of quote.<br><br>[Cheers.]<br><br>That is something I always wanted to be. And now that the association has voted me into the baseball Hall of Fame, my journey as a player is complete. |
| 00:37:09 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:37:10 | Howard | Guest | I don't know how much Brock took it, but boy, the public hated it. And he took—and he said to me after that, "The minute I said that, I knew I would never live it down." And so, now here you are, 20 years later, going into the Hall of Fame. And people are laying in wait for you in front of all the other Hall of Famers. When you're at your moment, you're having your moment, they're waiting for you to fall on your face. And so, what did Rickey do? Rickey went to college. Rickey went back to school. Rickey went to Laney College, took speech courses, had the students critique him. That's how important it was to him that he get this right and also to prove them wrong. And I remember asking him about this and he said, "Everybody went in there thinking I was gonna make a damn fool out of myself."<br><br>So, he's aware of that. And you're right, that is part of the reason why there's this great gap between these wonderful sort of apocryphal Rickey stories. What are they really rooted in? And that was one of the things when I was working on this book and people—when people had heard that I was working on a Rickey |

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| 00:38:41 | Jesse | Host | Henderson biography, so many people just couldn't wait for it because of these stories. And I said, "If you think you're getting 300 pages of third-person, wacky Rickey tales, you've come to the wrong place." There's a lot more to this man. That the purpose of this was also to give him his dignity as one of the great Mount Everest, Mount Rushmore level players in the history of the sport. When Rickey got old for a baseball player, when he got into his late 30s and early 40s, he continued to play professional baseball. There are people who feel that being a dignified professional athlete, if you're a great one, involves quitting while you're ahead. I'll kind of put my cards on the table and say [chuckles] that I would've watched Rickey play professional baseball 'til he was 60 and would've thought that was tremendous. I thought it was greatest thing ever that he was still able to play in the major leagues in his 40s. And like, you know, he stole 60-some bases or something when he was like 38 or 39.<br><br>[Howard confirms.] |
| 00:39:52 | Howard | Guest | I thought it was incredible, but I remember how many people around me would tell me about how sad it was. Let's start with this. When you were watching that, as a guy who's young enough to have—you know, you were a pro by then. But you were still—maybe looked up to a guy like that a little bit. You know? A little remarkable. What did you think? How did you feel about it, then? Well, it was very personal to me, because 1998 was my first year on the beat at the *San Jose Mercury News*. I'd been in the business for a while, but I wasn't in sports. This was my first professional job covering sports. Before, I'd covered some high schools and then I went over into business and technology. Now, I come back over to sports. And my first job was with the 1998 As for the *San Jose Mercury News*, and Rickey Henderson has come back to Oakland for the fourth and final time. So, I had a front row seat. Talked to Rickey—that was the first time I'd ever spoken to him. And so, I was with him the entire season. And it was really interesting.<br><br>Because you're right, most great players know when it's time. And for them, when it's time is, "I no longer get to dominate. I don't wanna be one of the guys. I was never one of the guys. I was never one of many. I was never average. It really sucks being average! I don't wanna struggle." And certainly, to be below average. And that's when guys walk away. Rickey didn't do that! Rickey took what his ability was allowing him to do with an amazing amount of grace. And he was the guy who was considered to have one of the biggest egos in sports. He was very egoless about it. One of my favorite lines was back in the day when Bob Gibson gave up a grand slam to Pete LaCock at the Atlanta Braves, 1975. Gibson was asked about it and he said, "When you give up grand slams to Pete LaCock, you know it's time to go."<br><br>[They chuckle.]<br><br>And so, I'm sure Pete LaCock didn't like taking that stray! But this was Bob Gibson's point. I'm the great Bob Gibson. And now, here's the great Rickey Henderson, 39 years old, at bat just getting blown away by pitchers that he used to wear out, losing in situations |

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| | | | where he had always won. And instead of walking away, he stayed. And instead of reminding everybody or being really boorish about it—he didn't say, "Oh, in my day, in my day." He just took what his body could give him at that time and realized that he's still good enough, in maybe these one or two-week stretches over the course of a season, that he could still do something to remind you that he was Rickey Henderson. |
| 00:42:16 | Jesse | Host | Well, Howard Bryant, I sure appreciate you taking this time to talk to me. And I really loved getting to read the book. Thanks for writing the story of this incredible, incredible player. |
| 00:42:24 | Howard | Guest | No, it's been my pleasure. Thank you so much. |
| 00:42:26 | Music | Transition | Buzzy synth. |
| 00:42:30 | Jesse | Host | Howard Bryant, everyone. His new book is called *Rickey: The Life and Legend of an American Original*. It's a great story about one of the greatest players ever to play the game. And not just one of the greatest but one of the five or so most fascinating. An incredible man. It's a great book. Go check it out.<br><br>[Music fades out.] |
| 00:42:55 | Music | Transition | Bright, chiming synth with a steady beat. |
| 00:43:01 | Jesse | Host | That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, my son Oscar just got eight fish, and four of them are named Greg.<br><br>Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Tabatha Myers. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team for sharing it with us, along with their label, Memphis Industries.<br><br>*Bullseye* is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us there and give us a follow. We'll share with you all of our interviews. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff. |
| 00:43:53 | Promo | Promo | **Speaker**: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.<br><br>[Music fades out.] |