

June 7, 1999--

Jack Clark finally has learned to appreciate the small things in life.

After playing major-league baseball for 18 years and then owning a successful drag-racing team, Clark filed for bankruptcy in 1993 because of bad business investments.

He took some time off.

He drove around the country on a Harley-Davidson.

Clark found peace in the forgiving backroads that are accessible only by motorcycle. Places outside of Daytona Beach, Fla., Sturgis, S.D., and rural Mexico. And just when Clark thought he had seen every small town, in January he was named manager of the River City Rascals in O'Fallon, Mo., near St. Louis.

The Rascals are a member of the independent Frontier League. For the next three months, Clark, 43, will travel by coach bus to Frontier outposts such as Chillicothe, Ohio, Springfield, Ill., and south suburban Crestwood, where last week Clark began his managerial career against the Cook County Cheetahs.

"I'm enjoying this country," Clark said before the Cheetahs beat the Rascals 5-2.

"There's so much of this country I never saw: in Utah, in Colorado, South and North Dakota. To be on a bike and see it is extra special. It's a peaceful feeling."

During his 18-year career, Clark played in two World Series and hit 340 home runs. He debuted with the San Francisco Giants in 1975 and spent 10 productive seasons there before being traded to the St. Louis Cardinals.

Clark left St. Louis to sign with the New York Yankees and ended his career in 1992, after stints with the San Diego Padres and Boston Red Sox. At the end of his career, Clark owned 18 cars, one for every year he played big-league ball. He was involved in drag racing between 1993 and '96.

"The bankruptcy wasn't because of the cars," Clark said. "It was because of a bad financial adviser. He wanted me out of racing and he put my money in other places. He thought it would be a good way to stop me (in racing). It was a long, bad, ugly drag. It was a real drain on my health.

"Motorcycles helped me relax from that. I didn't think about baseball. I didn't think about racing. I thought about living and enjoying my life. I've always done that, but sometimes you need something that helps you get back to that. The bikes always

have. And the people who ride the bikes are a subculture among themselves. It's like family."

When Clark rides into Sturgis, the Cooperstown of Choppers, no one knows him as an ex-ballplayer. Smiling brightly and wearing Ray-Bans, Clark said, "They just want to see how cool your bike is."

Clark owns several Harleys, including cruising motorcycles with saddlebags and a couple of showy city bikes. He has homes in Dallas and Scottsdale, Ariz.

Clark's former Cardinals teammate pitcher Greg Mathews talked him into joining the Rascals. Mathews is the Rascals' pitching coach and owns Greg Mathews Major League Training Center in St. Peters, outside of St. Louis.

The Frontier League is about as low as you can go.

Only 961 fans were in the stands for the Cheetahs-Rascals game on a chilly Thursday night. The concession stands at comfortable Hawkinson-Ford Field have yet to be built, and Crestwood Mayor Chester Stranczek was helping install seats before opening night Wednesday.

"This is absolutely a stepping-stone for me," Clark said. "My goal is to get back to the major leagues in some form. Wherever my journey takes me is basically where I go. Professional drag racing was another journey. The one thing I learned from drag racing is how I went right to the top. When I started driving, I started driving the top-fuel dragsters.

"In baseball, I came up through high school and the minors and earned my right to become a major-league baseball player. In drag racing, I didn't pay my dues at lower levels and learn how to gradually increase the speed from 200 miles an hour to 250 miles an hour to 300 miles an hour. But baseball is what I know best and what I like to teach the most. And instead of saying, 'Hey, give me a job in the major leagues,' I'd rather do this and move my way up.

"It's just so good to be back wearing a uniform on the field."

The throwback Rascals uniforms are a baggy orange and black that resemble Clark's colors with the San Francisco Giants. Clark excused himself from an interview to carry two white buckets of baseballs to Mathews, who stood on the pitching mound. Clark softly told Mathews, "We are way down on baseballs." As the manager walked back to the dugout, he looked up at the empty stadium.

Clark is unsure if his perception as a candid ballplayer will hurt him in his pursuit of a major-league gig. The now-defunct National Sports Daily once titled a cover story on Clark, "The Last Honest Man."

"I was pretty outspoken," Clark said. "That's my personality. I was kind of like (current Giants manager) Dusty Baker in the clubhouse. When Frank Robinson made me the captain of the San Francisco Giants, Dusty was also a Giant. I remember Dusty coming up to me and telling me what goes along with being a captain. Those things don't get handed to you. You earn them, and if you earn them, there's a reason for it."

Between 1987 and 1990, Clark walked 485 times, the highest total since Mickey Mantle's 500 in 1955-58. In his 18-year career, Clark struck out 1,441 times and walked 1,262 times. Surely, he will teach his young Rascals patience.

"They don't want to hear that," said Clark, who also serves as hitting instructor. "They just want to swing the bat."

Former Cubs outfielder Hank Sauer was Clark's hitting guru.

"No matter where I played, Boston or St. Louis, if I was in a slump and had a day off, on my own dime I'd fly back to San Francisco," Clark said. "I'd meet him in a batting cage with quarter machines, he'd get me straightened out and I'd fly back."

"But you can't overload these guys with that stuff because their level of ability is not there."

Clark showed incredible composure as the Rascals fumbled away the game. The Cheetahs broke open the game with a three-run fifth inning that began with a walk, the runner advancing on a two-base throwing error by Rascals second baseman Paul Weeks and another run scoring on an errant throw from left fielder Tim Still.

Clark watched the circus with arms folded, standing alone in the dugout near the locker-room tunnel.

He was in the shadows, which is where he wants to be. That is where all enlightened journeys begin.