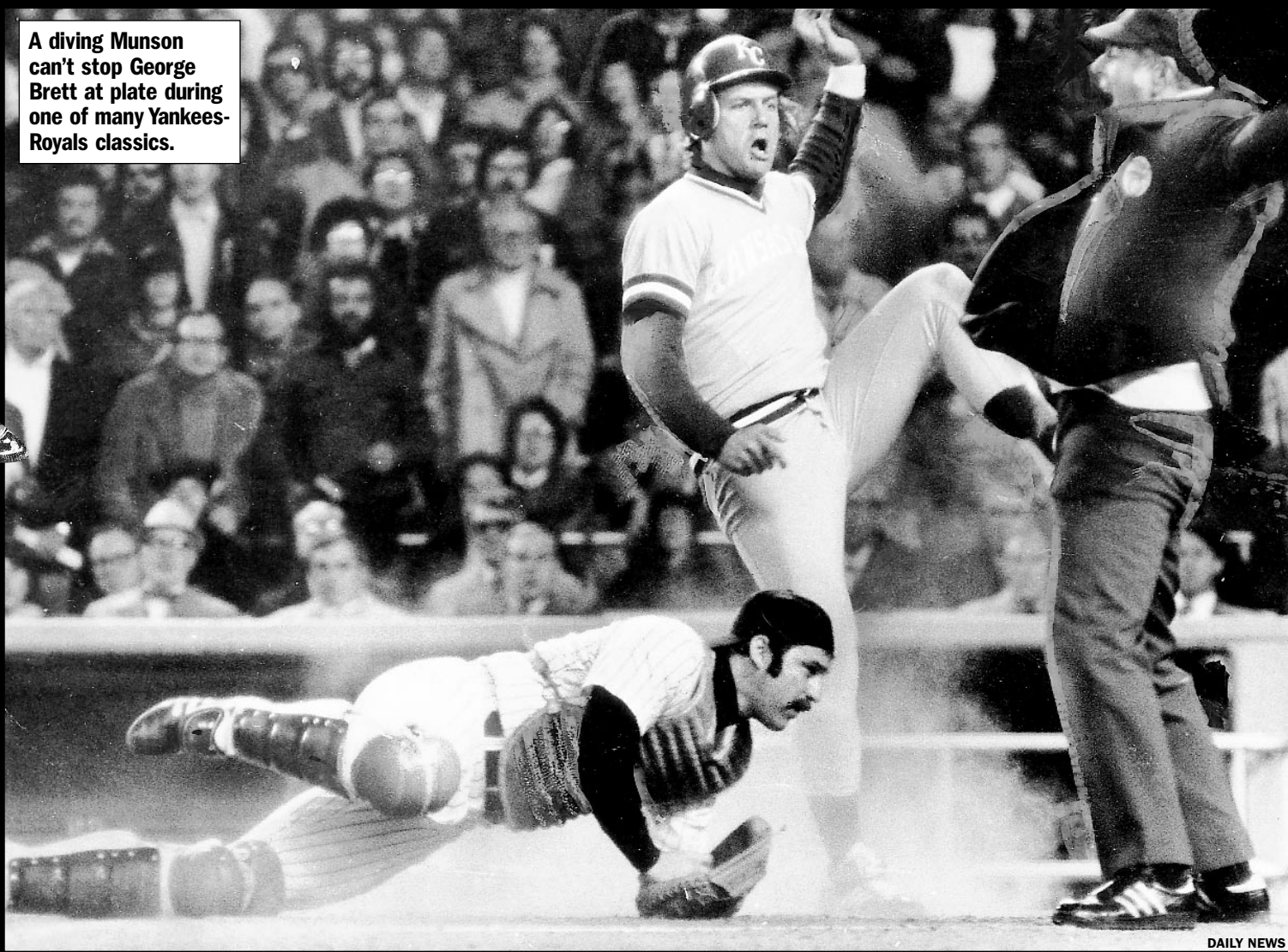


## THURMAN MUNSON'S FINAL HOUR

A diving Munson can't stop George Brett at plate during one of many Yankees-Royals classics.



DAILY NEWS

**'I love you very much,' he says. He assures her everything will be fine, that they will always have each other.**

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a night. His father insisted on being the one to get up to comfort him. Michael seemed to do better when his father was home. It was one more reason to get the plane.

**3:41 p.m.** N15NY is cleared for take-off on Runway 23 by air-traffic controller George F. Ackley. The temperature is 76 degrees, visibility 10 miles. N15NY accelerates down Runway 23 and takes off. The Citation climbs into the sky over northeast Ohio, where Thurman was born and raised and had just built his dream house, a sprawling brick colonial with tall columns in front.

"Do you know who's flying that N15NY?" a fellow controller asks Ackley. Ackley shakes his head.

"That's Thurman Munson." Ackley didn't know Munson had a Citation. Twenty-five years later, Diana is convinced he would not have had it much longer. "He was coming around, I know he was," she says. "I am 100% sure he was going to sell it."

Munson was a savvy play-caller, a manager of games behind the plate, a mustachioed man of supreme confidence who reassured his pitchers by his strong, squatty presence and a grit that moved Lou Piniella to call him "the greatest competitor I've ever seen." All the pitchers had to do was follow his lead, throw the pitch he wanted, and they would be fine. He could see things unfolding before him. He was the same way in handball, playing a couple of shots ahead, and in business. "He had this knack for looking at a vacant piece of property and saying, 'Some day there's going to be a shopping center on this land,'" Anderson says.

Anderson had invested in a string of racketball clubs. "Why don't you get in on it?" Anderson said to Munson. "It's going to make me a zillionaire."

Munson didn't like the racketball business. He was sure it would be a passing fad. Days before the flight, Munson agreed to form a real-estate partnership with Anderson — on the condition that Anderson sell off his racketball holdings. Anderson complied, reluctantly. He had

### FROM THE NTSB AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT REPORT

(The passenger in the right seat) noticed that the landing gear had not been lowered, so he said, "I don't think you want to land this airplane with the gear still up." . . . He recalled saying to the pilot, "We're sinking."

the partnership papers with him in the Citation that day. The racketball clubs all went belly up. "Thurman saved me from going bankrupt," Anderson says.

**3:50 p.m.** As it reaches an altitude of about 2,800 feet (the airport is 1,217 feet above sea level), Munson, heeding the tower's instructions, follows a left-traffic pattern, essentially making a big left-handed loop, coming around and landing on the same Runway 23 he took off on. N15NY lowers its landing gear and extends the approach flaps and touches down uneventfully, and then Munson raises the flaps for takeoff and applies the thrust and is aloft again, beginning a second left-hand circuit. Munson retracts the landing gear and flaps and pulls back the right throttle to demonstrate how the plane can climb with a single engine. This time he reaches 3,000 feet. He applies the speed brakes to slow the aircraft to below the maximum gear-lowering speed of 174 KIAS (knots indicated air speed).

Again, he puts down the gear and extends the flaps and makes another touch-and-go landing. The landing is a little bit hard.

Bill Crocker is a restaurateur in Akron. He opened his first restaurant on Munson's birthday — June 7 — in 1979, and still has an item on the menu called "Frog Legs Thurman Munson." Munson loved them, and it was a way to say thank you to Munson for loaning him \$10,000 to get started. Crocker had little money behind him; his father worked in the rubber in-

dustry for 50 years. "That \$10,000 was like \$100,000 to me," says Crocker. He met Munson on the handball courts at the Canton YMCA — the same place Munson met Jerry Anderson. Munson wrote the check with a note that said, simply, "Good luck. Thurm."

Munson was always doing things like that, Crocker says, extending kindnesses to people, without fanfare. When Munson found out about a New York writer who was missing his wife and children during spring training but couldn't afford to fly them down, he wrote him a check and insisted he not tell anyone. He would show up at dinners and fund-raisers, with one condition: no publicity. Munson's attitude about public-relations was simple: he didn't give a damn about it. He was who he was. He could no more spin an image or affect an air than he could keep his uniform clean.

Or as former Yankee GM Gabe Paul once said, "Thurman Munson is a nice guy who doesn't want anyone to know it."

**3:56 p.m.** On the third touch-and-go take-off, Munson pushes the throttles forward and the jet takes off again and as they veer crosswind in another circuit, Munson invites David Hall, in the passenger seat, to take the controls and see how responsive the plane is and to make a no-flaps landing. Hall takes over, Munson working the throttles. Hall loops around and reaches 170 KIAS and then brings it in long, landing about the midway point of the runway. Munson immediately lowers the flaps to takeoff position, applies