

COVER STORY

Blue Thunder still reigns near San Francisco Bay

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE
Review Staff Writer

AFTER THE San Francisco Giants conclude pre-game warmups, pitcher Vida Blue is ultra-busy. Sandwiching media interviews, picture-taking with fans and signing autographs on baseballs, game programs, scratch pads and baseball gloves, Blue is just as much of a fan favorite now as he was back in the early '70s with the Oakland A's.

Small wonder. The 37-year-old flamethrower is as affable as ever. Today, he's instructing one of the bat boys on how to correctly field fly balls. "You've got to hold your glove and hands this way," Blue explains, as the wide-eyed youngster takes in every word.

Then there's the admiring fan who shows Blue her personal scrapbook of his accomplishments as a major-leaguer dating back to his rookie year.

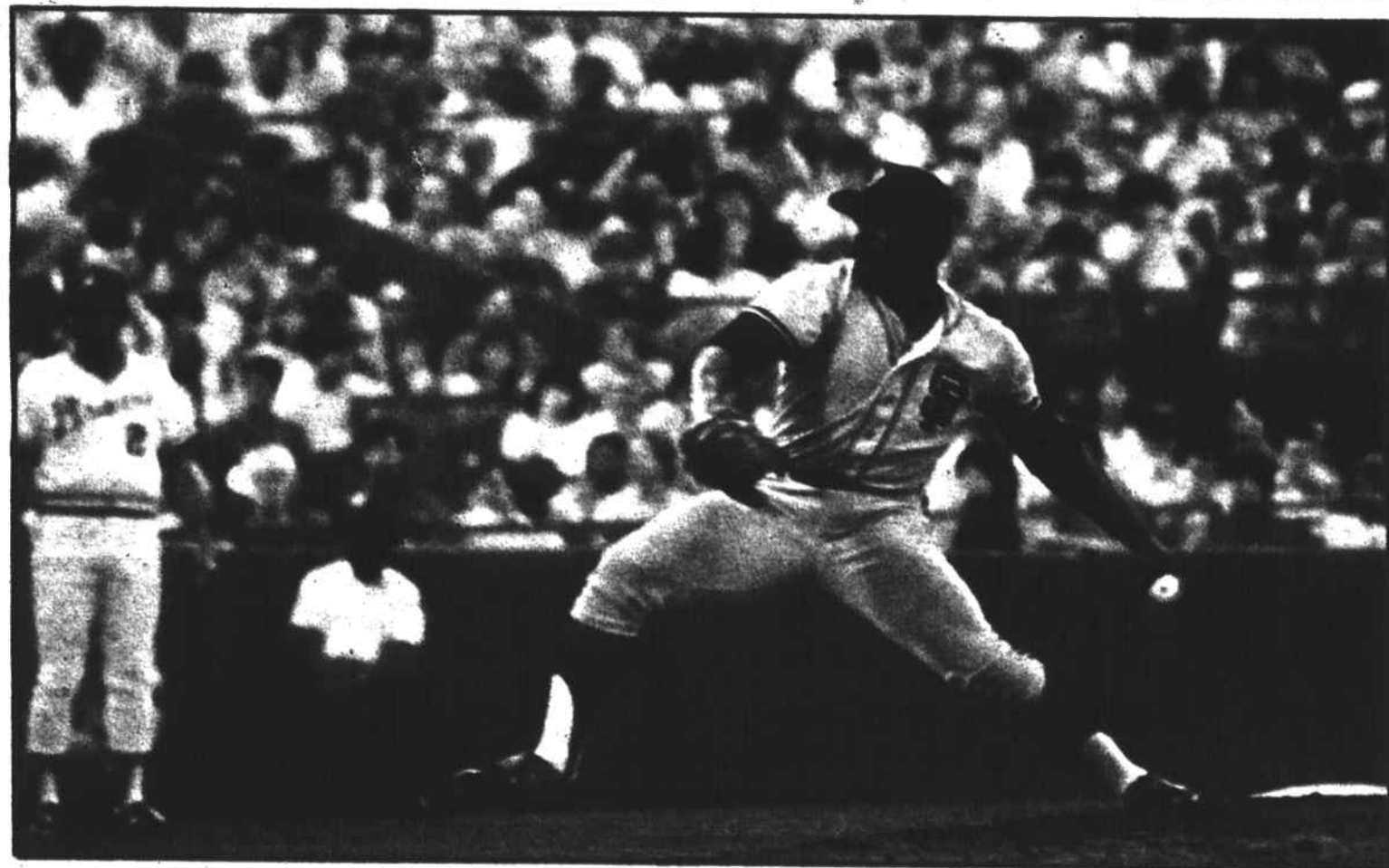
Blue is one of the reasons the Giants are a National League contender this

the Giants lefty announces, "Vida Blue, take two. 5-4-3-2-1, roll 'em."

Vida Blue once was what Dwight Gooden is today: a young fireballer whose future seemed unlimited. He also was a has-been before his time, once wondering if he would ever throw another pitch in the big leagues.

He was released by the Kansas City Royals in August 1983 amid a drug scandal that included teammates Willie Wilson, Willie Mays Aikens and Jerry Martin. He was suspended from playing in the league by the commissioner, convicted of cocaine possession and sentenced to a term in a Texas prison. Blue didn't play at all in 1984.

Two seasons later, though, Blue is vibrant, as always, and throwing sizzling fastballs, as he always has during his 14 years in the big time. He was invited to the Giants' camp in '85 as a non-roster player and made the team. At first, he was slotted as a reliever, but by late July, he had worked himself into the starting rotation and finished the year 8-8.



season. In '85, they lost 100 games, but this year it's a different tune. San Francisco is locked in a battle for first place in the NL West with the Houston Astros, two weeks from All-Star break.

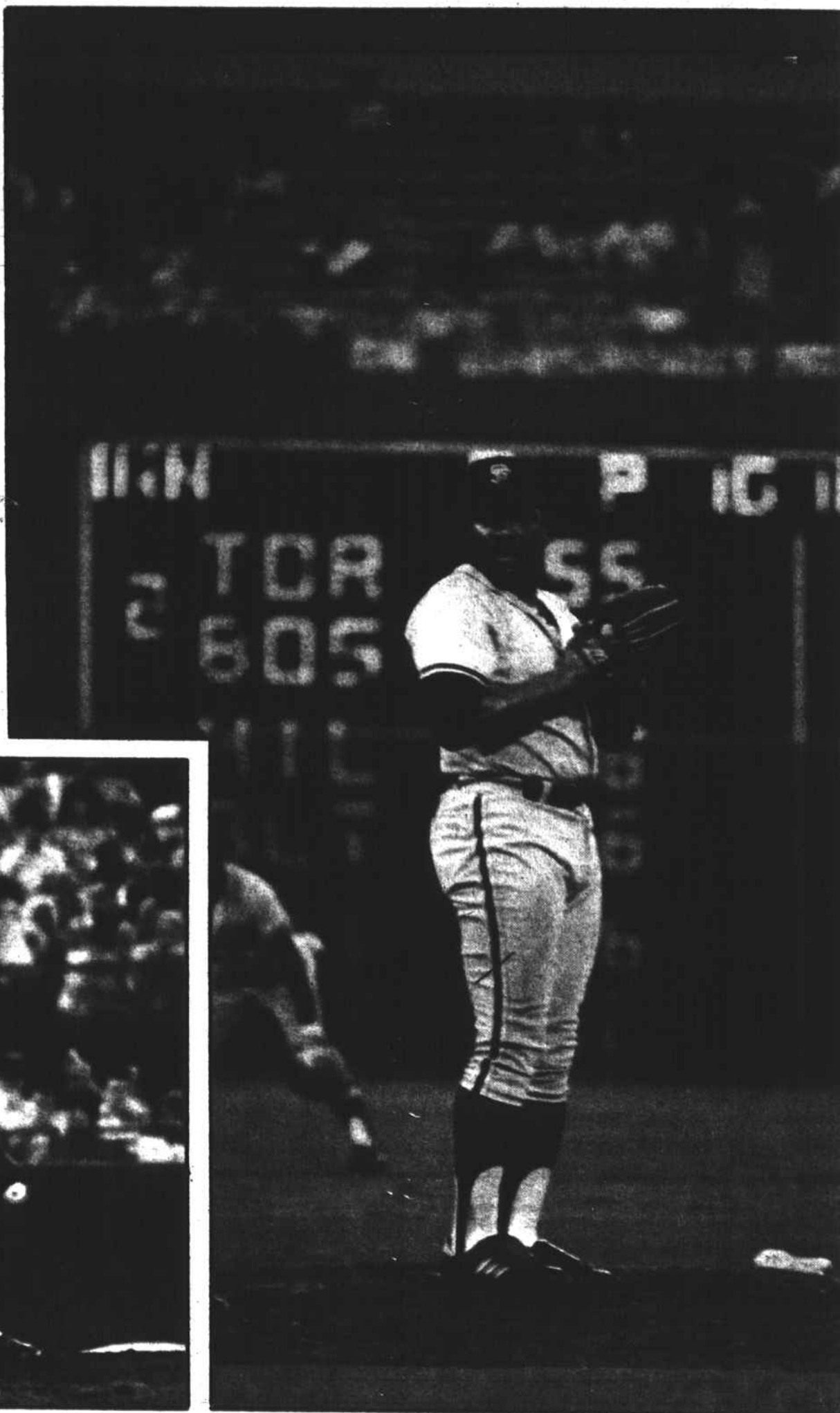
The former Southern University standout is also well-equipped in the wit-and-humor department. An anxious writer waits for him to finish autographs and TV interviews. Blue pulls up a chair next to the dugout. "OK, fella," he says, trying to hide a grin. "Let's get this interview done now. Please step into my office."

As the writer starts his tape recorder,

Unlike many lefties, who fall prey to sore arms, Blue still throws fire at 37 years old (photos by Craig T. Greenlee).

Approaching mid-season this year, Blue was 5-4 with a 3.14 ERA. But the stats that tell the true story are the ones he accumulated in June, when he won four of five games, struck out 22 and posted a 1.69 ERA. He started that month with a 1-3 slate.

Careerwise, Blue got his 2,000th strikeout in '85 and won his 200th game this past April. As of this writing, his win-loss record is 204-155 with a 3.26 ERA in 483 lifetime games,



his career strikeout total, 2,113. What's more, Blue has only had three losing seasons as a pitcher.

"I feel really good about myself," Blue says, "and I'm pitching better now than I have during my entire career. I'm working on a sinker, and that's been a key factor in the success I've had so far this year."

The difference, Blue adds, is that he's making every pitch count and isn't trying to strike out everybody. "I'm

setting up my pitches now," he says, "and by that I mean that I'm trying to make every pitch serve a purpose. Before, I was just throwing on natural ability and throwing hard. But it's good to know that I can still get the strikeout when I need to, so more power to me."

It's uncommon for a power pitcher to last as long as Blue has. There's still enough zip in his fastball to register 90-mph readings on a radar gun. He's mellowed a bit, gained some weight and there's a faint sprinkle of gray hair. But he's still Vida Blue with the

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