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A Real Down-Home Hunter

BY BOB HELLER
Staff Sports Writer

HERTFORD—Down in Eastern North Carolina, the land of soybeans, peanuts, single lane roads and "Eat Maola Ice Cream" signs, Indian Summer was still simmering just a few days ago.

Big Bill Fowler was working in his shed, the perspiration dripping down the sides of his face and ringing his collar.

Mayor Bill Cox was pumping gas at his "Union One Stop Service" on the corner of Church and Grubb Streets, just as he has since 1939. Instead of worrying about the antifreeze shortage, he was boasting of the town's "beautiful waterfront."

Charles Woodard's pharmacy was doing a land office business (it was the first of the month, "right after-social security and welfare checks," explained the owner) . . . a place where "grill cheese" is still 30 cents and a small drink a thin dime.

And about three or four miles from the center of town septuagenarian Abbott Hunter was out in the fields, supervising the whirling soybean-picking machine, which was clearing the last of the area before the harder weather set in.

JUST ABOUT everyone in Hertford (county seat and population 2,023 according to the chamber of commerce) knows everybody else. None of the above would come as any surprise.

There's one other person in town these days. He was born and raised here, but he has spent three-quarters of the last decade outside Perquimans County.

His name is Jimmy Hunter. To those unfamiliar with down-home country life, that's Catfish Hunter . . . the same Catfish Hunter who has helped the Oakland A's win three straight World Series; the same Catfish Hunter who easily won the American League Cy Young award this season; the same Catfish Hunter who no one—repeat, no one—calls Catfish in these parts.

IT WAS early Sunday afternoon and Jimmy and Helen Hunter were coming home from church. Before the former could shed his knit suit, he signed autographs and obligingly posed for pictures with a family which had driven the hour-and-a-half drive from Norfolk, Va., and was waiting in the driveway.

Then, after telling a disappointed five-year-old son Todd that the weekly ball game would have to wait a while, he jumped into casual country-cowboy clothes, hopped into his grey Ford pickup truck and headed down the road a half-mile to the horse show.

"I've never been to one of these before, and I really don't care about 'em," he confided.

But he said he'd be there, and he was.

Charlie Fowler, son of former employer Bill, had talked Hun-

ter into handing out trophies and ribbons at the Perquimans County Horse and Pony Show. The latter brought along a big fistful of official "Jim 'Catfish' Hunter" autographed post cards.

"Hey, Jimmy. How things goin', Jimmy?" A steady stream of well-wishers—and friends—besieged Hunter.

A pat on the back here, a friendly elbow to the side and wink of the eye there.

One man approached him and held out his hand. Jimmy Hunter started to shake it.

"Hell no," he laughed. "I don't want your hand, give me a chew."

Hunter reached into his pouch of Red Man and handed over a chew.

here. We wouldn't want to live anywhere else.

"Before I married Jimmy, I hadn't been outside of the Carolinas, Virginia and Maryland. But California is all right, I guess. We don't—or I don't think we could—live in the city. We live in a little town called Walnut Creek, which is about 30 minutes from the ball park.

"Sure, the lifestyle is different. We made good friends with people out there, both in and out of baseball. But one of the bad things about the sport is you may have good friends who are traded . . . and you may never see them again.

"That's what happened with (Mike) Hegan. He was traded to the Yankees and then to Milwaukee. We haven't seen

doesn't turn them away and then he can't get much done."

Says Jimmy: "When people stop by, I guess I don't mind talking baseball. At times, though, I wish I'd built this home back in the woods some place, so people wouldn't know.

THAT REALLY would not be like Jimmy Hunter, though.

His phone is listed in the directory as "Jim (Catfish) Hunter." Only those who don't know him would be interested in the parenthetical information.

When Hunter attends the North Carolina Hall of Fame banquet in Greensboro Dec. 2, it will be one of his very few dinner or speaking engagements.



The Hall Of Famers

On Dec. 2 in Greensboro, five men will be inducted into the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame. To be honored at the annual banquet are Jim (Catfish) Hunter, Cy Young-award winning pitcher of the World Champion Oakland A's from Hertford; Earle Edwards, former North Carolina State football coach; Art Weiner, former Carolina All-American football player from Greensboro; Buck Leonard, former star of the Negro professional baseball league from Rocky Mount; and the late Clayton Heafner, an outstanding amateur and later professional golfer.

This is the second in a series of Sports Cavalcades in which the Daily News spotlights these five new Hall of Famers.

Staff writer Bob Heller, who also handled the photography on this assignment, spent several days in eastern North Carolina gathering material for today's Jimmy Hunter story.

Next week, associate sports editor David Lamm tells the Clayton Heafner story and staff writer Bodie McDowell talks with Buck Leonard.

And so it went for a couple hours.

Hunter, trying his best to conceal his boredom, excused himself about two hours later, shortly after the Ladies Open Pleasure—English & Western event, No. 16 on a card of 24.

HELEN HUNTER, Jimmy's high school sweetheart, had been waiting inside the less-than-year-old but unpretentious brick house.

Above the mantle are twin deer trophies. On a living room wall is a glass-enclosed case full of shotguns.

Baseball awards, plaques and memorabilia are confined to a paneled garage.

Jim and Helen were married shortly after the 1966 baseball season. "Because we wanted to wait until after I graduated from high school," according to Helen.

She was a cheerleader for three years at Perquimans County High, "where Jimmy played baseball, football and track."

THE LIFESTYLE has changed somewhat, since Kansas City and Oakland are more than a few miles from Hertford.

"All my kinfolk (she is from a family of 13) and all Jimmy's (a family of 11) are still around

him since he left Oakland, though I saw his wife for a few minutes in Chicago once. But that's just the way it is. You get tired of it sometimes and I really haven't decided what to do when the children get up in school (Todd is in first-year kindergarten and Kimberly Ann is just 15-months).

THE HUNTERS are, without a doubt, genuinely down-home, and at-home in Perquimans County.

Charles Finley and the Great Public Relations Game are as far removed as the planet Pluto.

Jimmy was out hunting when the Cy Young news came in and he didn't find out about it till he returned home, around 5 o'clock.

"He couldn't believe it at first, he thought I was kidding," recalled Helen. "But even after I had him convinced, he was more concerned about finding the two hunting dogs he had lost."

Jimmy is somewhat philosophical about his off-season life. He knows the unwanted attention is a price he must pay for his fame and money.

"We've got about 113 acres of land," said Ms. Hunter. "Jimmy likes to do a lot of work around here, but so often he'll be outside and people will stop by to meet him, or just to talk. He

From October to February he's in Hertford. When a Hall of Fame official attempted to contact Hunter in Oakland less than 48 hours after the World Series had ended, he found the phone had already been disconnected.

He was out hunting in the county, as he will be every available Monday, Wednesday and Saturday until spring training beckons him to Arizona.

"I'm still a country boy, and I'll always be a country boy," said Hunter. "During the season I don't care if sportswriters talk to me or not.

"When the season's over, though, I like to hunt, fish and just work around the barn."

JIMMY HUNTER was not trying to make the visitor feel uncomfortable. He was simply relating his true, straight-from-the-heart, feelings.

"Publicity really doesn't mean anything to me," said Hunter. "As long as I get paid what my contract calls for, I just don't care. My first year at Kansas City I got mad at a local story headlined, 'Should They Throw the Catfish Back?' Mo Drabowsky saw me in the clubhouse that day and could tell just by looking at me that I had read it. From what he told me, I've learned to read what's said

about others, and almost ignore what's said about me."

When you are currently one of the National Pastime's handful of legitimate superstars, that is sometimes difficult.

"Sometimes, I don't mind talking about baseball," he said. "I think, though, if you do not eat and sleep baseball 12 months a year, then when spring training comes around you're ready for it. Otherwise, I don't think I would be.

"Right now, though, I feel like I don't even want to touch a baseball. If you're a carpenter and every minute you're talking about your job, wherever you go you're asked, 'how do you fix this' or 'how do you fix that.' you're going to get pretty tired of it."

"But as long as they pay me and as long as I think I'm doing the job, I'll play baseball. People may say I play for money . . . sure, I do. But I do like the game."

ACTUALLY, THE entire Hunter family likes the game.

If there is one thing Jimmy's mother remembers about raising the family it was, "The yard was always full of people playing baseball."

The consensus among the family, townfolk and even a few major league scouts, is that Jimmy's brother Marvin, 14 years his senior, could have made the big leagues as an infielder.

"He could have had a scholarship had he not gone into the army," recalled Jimmy. "I honestly feel he could've made the major leagues.

Brother Pete, 33 years old to Jimmy's 28, has perhaps been the closest. He is also the subject of the famous hunting accident story, embellished so many times by Curt Gowdy.

Pete, too, was a pitcher. Now the baseball coach at Perquimans (and jayvee basketball coach and drivers' education instructor), Pete, "like Jimmy," he remembers, pitched a perfect game his junior year in school.

IF THERE are any complex insights or strange stories to tell about Jimmy Hunter, Pete might know.

But like everyone else, he insists Jimmy hasn't changed. Nothing's gone to his head, he's the same old Jimmy. He's as full of ball as he always was," he jokes.

Even though Pete is remembered for shooting off Jimmy's toe in that Thanksgiving Day accident some 11 years ago, the two still go hunting together on a regular basis. (Note this is a true story, compared to the totally fictitious "how Catfish got his name" tale.)

They are both members of the Bear Swamp Hunting Club, where on citizen band radio Jimmy is known as Silver Bullet, Pete as Fuzzy Lip (he has a red mustache) and Marvin (the county clerk) as Office One.

Pete's memories of growing up are highlighted by his brother Jimmy and his father Abbott.

"Ever since we were little we hunted together, going back to the BB guns," said Pete. "We've always been close. Jimmy and I would work together, sleep together and like all brothers growing up, fight together."

(In an unpublicized incident in pre-adolescence, Pete broke one of Jimmy's fingers . . . on his pitching hand.)

OF GROWING up as one, large tenant-farming family, Pete recalls. "It was tough to make ends meet. I don't want to over-dramatize the situation . . . but at the time we thought the clothes we wore were decent. Now I don't really know if they were or not.

"Our father was farming and logging in the summertime. There were no complaints; there was hard work to be done and we all knew it.

"Often, after we were done chopping peanuts on our land we'd help other farmers in the area. To show that some things have changed here, back then we got 12 for a whole day's work."

This was not an unusual life. (See JIMMY, Page 7)



The Hunters: Todd, Helen, Kimberly Ann, Jimmy And Chief

More Than A Country Fast Ball

At 28 years of age, Jim Hunter has reached the pinnacle of athletic success. He is a member of the select class in his sport, baseball.

North Carolina has a strong tradition of supplying the major leagues with outstanding talent, but barring injuries or a drastic change of heart, Hertford's Jimmy Hunter could well be No. 1.

Though a terror under the tutelage of Coaches Bobby Carter at Perquimans High and Al Vaughn of the Ahsokie Legion team, Hunter struggled through his first five major league seasons (though 1966 was highlighted by a sub-three ERA and a perfect game against the Twins).

But since then, the \$75,000 "bonus baby," who had his career started with a Charles Finley-paid visit to the Mayo Clinic, has known nothing but success.

In 1970, he pitched in 40 games and won 18; in 1971, Hunter posted a 21-11 record and 2.98 ERA; in 1972, it was 21-7 and a glittering 2.04 ERA; in '73, 21-5 (in spite of a midseason injury) and this season, a 25-12 mark, a 2.49 ERA and six shutouts.

The past three seasons, he has been an all-star selection and has been instrumental in the Oakland A's winning consecutive World Championships and of course this year he has been voted American League pitcher-of-the-year by the players and the coveted Cy Young award by the Baseball Writers' Association of America.

In 10 major league seasons, Hunter holds a 161-113 record.

Next month, he will be enshrined in the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame. It is only a matter of time before he joins an even more select group in Comptonville, N.Y.

