

Former pitching star coaching little league team



Sore seat

Major leaguer turned little league manager Jimmy Hunter helps player Tony Hughs to first base after he took a fast ball to the sitting place in a contest last week.

Despite the throws that soar over the first baseman's head, and the grounders that trickle between legs, a little leaguer dreams of one day becoming a big leaguer, just like so and so (insert your childhood hero).

Every kid has a baseball star he idolizes, and emulates as best he can.

The kids on the Bethel team, though, don't have to look far for a hero, not much further than the coach.

He's not a barber, or a farmer who played high school ball, or any other typical little league coach. He's Jimmy Hunter, genuine, bona-fide, certified major leaguer, and one of the best pitchers ever to have fired a baseball.

Hunter is coaching the Bethel team, along with Wayne Perry and Joe Meades, and with a coach like that, who needs bubble gum cards?

Predictably, Perry says the young players are somewhat in awe of their coach. "They know he's pitched in the big leagues and everything, and they try to do what he says, but sometimes they just can't," he said.

The Bethel squad is somewhat younger than most of the teams in the league, and their inexperience showed last Tuesday night as they took a pounding at the hands of Hertford, 14-3.

Hunter had some stern words for his young team in the dugout following the

game. "Do you want to practice tomorrow afternoon?" The kids were agreeable. "And I don't want any of this messing around and playing around like we had last time. If you do, you're going to run 10 laps."

Surrounded by sportswriters, Hunter said after the game that he enjoys coaching the youngsters, even though he was less than eager to take on the job before the season started.

He had already bought a new lawnmower, and made a commitment to keep the outfield and the horse show grounds mowed. "I thought if I did that I wouldn't have to manage," he said.

But the man who wore a Yankee cap only last year now wears a green cap with a gold B. "Coach H." is inscribed on the bottom side of the brim. Hunter agreed to accept the job only if another fellow would share responsibilities equally.

That fellow turned out to be Perry. "If we win, he's the coach. If we lose, I'm the coach," Perry joked. So far Bethel has been losing.

One frustrating aspect of coaching, to Hunter, is that sometimes he forgets how young the players are, and how long it takes for talent to develop.

"It's like with Todd. He's 10 years years old but sometimes I forget and think he's 15 and should be doing better than he does," Hunter said.

The sandy haired athlete concedes that parents of the players might expect a little more because of his past, but he says his impact is limited.

"They probably do (expect more)," he said, "but I can't hit the ball for 'em and I can't throw the ball for 'em. There's only so much I can do and that's it."

There is also the danger of riding the youngsters so hard that they get discouraged. "You can get on 'em so much that the start crying, or some of the older guys want to fight you," he said.

Hunter's competitive edge comes out when he's coaching the youngsters. It's obvious that he wants to win.

With elbows draped over the chain link fence that separates the dugout from the playing field, he intently watches the action, occasionally shouting encouragement or instruction.

But he doesn't let winning get out of perspective. Every boy on the team gets a chance to play.

Hunter feels that organized little league play is good for the kids, and helps develop better players on down the line.

When he was a kid, there was no official little league in the county, but that didn't keep him and his friends from playing ball, and a whole lot of it.

His sandlot team was called the Bear Swamp Bears. They would get on their bikes on

Saturdays and ride to Winfall to play that neighborhood team, then on to Hertford to play another pickup team, and back to Bear Swamp to play ball for the rest of the afternoon.

The trouble with developing good young players today is that their parents don't have time for them, Hunter said. Parents have to get behind their youngsters.

"That's what it takes to make good ball players," he said. "Just turn 'em loose and one or two might become good ballplayers."

Is Hunter considering moving on to bigger and better coaching jobs? No way, he says.

"I wouldn't have it. Nobody wants to listen. Everybody knows too much," he said.

Knowing too much can even be a problem in little league ball. The youngsters want to keep doing what has worked before, even if it's wrong.

"Like sliding into a bag, they might want to tag his head instead of his feet," Hunter said. "You say something about it and they'll say, 'I got him out last time.'"

He said that coaching is taking more time than he thought it was going to, but it has its definite rewards.

"Like Craig Smith," Hunter said. "I put him on base and he scored a run. He never smiles. But he came across the plate with a smile this big on his face," he said, holding up his hands to demonstrate.

Text and photos
by
Mike McLaughlin



Between innings

Hunter listens as one of his players seeks his advice between innings during last week's game.

Sports magazine writer in big league of another sort

Last Tuesday night's confrontation between the Bethel and Hertford little league teams could have been a national championship game for all the media fanfare.

There was a television crew from WBTV in Charlotte, a sports writer from the CHARLOTTE NEWS, a writer-photographer team from the VIRGINIAN PILOT, and most impressive of all, there was Doug Looney, writer for SPORTS ILLUSTRATED.

A big budget weekly magazine that showcases some of the best writing and photography to be found anywhere, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED is perhaps the country's most respected sports publication.

Looney, like the others, was in town to profile the transition of Jimmy Hunter from major league pitching star, to former major league pitching star, to little league coach.

Only he had a little more time to do it, and to do it right.

Upon arrival Tuesday night, Looney headed straight for the little league ballpark. There he spent the evening alternately mingling with the crowd, sitting in the stands with Hunter's mother, watching the game, talking to folks.

"I tend to kind of wander around a lot. I never liked sitting in the press box. I've never gotten one good story in the press box," he said.

"I talked to a lot of parents, other coaches, everybody was absolutely 100 percent certified friendly."

On Wednesday, Looney was on the streets of Hertford, in further pursuit of a technique that sort of circles the prey, gathering the impressions that others have of Jimmy Hunter.

He talked to Mayor Bill Cox, brother Marvin Hunter, and close friend Charles Woodard, to mention a few.

A tall man, dressed in Levis and cowboy boots, Looney doesn't fit the image of the typical New York sports writer, if there is such a thing.

He appears extremely relaxed and very friendly, definitely in no hurry. He listens intently to comments on Hunter, occasionally jotting down notes, coaxing his speaker along with nods of approval and encouraging words.

Looney realizes the importance of getting people to talk, and listening to what they have to say. What they tell him will, to a large degree, dictate the quality of his story.

And how others see Hunter will be just as important as how Hunter sees himself.

"The others tend to be much better, in almost every case, than the subject himself," Looney said. "I always ask people, 'Who else could tell me something?'"

A graduate of the University of Colorado's journalism school, Looney worked a succession of newspaper, and publishing-related jobs before landing his post at SPORTS ILLUSTRATED. His early jobs were in news writing, and he got into sports somewhat by accident.

"I went to work for the NATIONAL OBSERVER in Washington," he said. "I wanted to cover politics, but they said, 'Would you write sports for a year?'"

Looney apparently had the knack for it. That year led into 10 years at SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, and he is now an associate writer, specializing in college football, but doing all kinds of stories.

Last year, he estimated that he wrote 25 stories in his travels around the country.

He says it's hard to think of a favorite. "My favorite story is the one I'm working on right now," said Looney. Soon after they are published, he loses interest in them.

But he singles out an interview with former N.C. State football coach Lou Holtz (now at Arkansas) as one he remembers fondly.

Writing for SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, isn't as glamorous as it might appear on the surface, Looney asserts.

"It's not easy. The job is somewhat misleading — the big games, the big events. You're dealing a lot of times with celebrities... But the magazine demands great stories. Fear is a great motivating factor."

"You can never think of yourself as indispensable at SPORTS ILLUSTRATED," Looney said.

And the constant cross-country flights, the get a story at any cost philosophy, can be a grind at times.

For instance, if Looney had arrived in Hertford only to find that Hunter was bound for a business meeting in Los Angeles, he would be expected to board the plane and go with him.

There is also the chance that he might pour his heart into a story only to have it cancelled at the last minute.

Case in point: Looney was to write a story on the Florida-Georgia football game. Like everyone else, he was sure that Florida was going to win so he spent the week sort of living with the team, preparing for a major story. Georgia won.

It was a mad struggle for Looney to come up with anything to write about. He took his case to Vince Dooley, the Georgia head coach.

No problem, said Dooley. You can ride the team plane back to Athens with us and get your story.

Fine, but as the plane is about to take off, six members of the University of Georgia Board of Regents and their wives board, saying they want to fly back with the team.

The passenger load must be reduced by 12. The cull-count reaches 11, including assistant coaches, and the Looney gets the tap on the shoulder. Got to go, Doug.

Just tell me the players you want to talk to and I'll have them waiting for you in Athens, Dooley says.

Getting to Athens is another problem. Looney finally gets a flight into Atlanta, but from there, there is no flight into

Athens. He charts a small plane.

At 2 a.m. he is in Athens. Dooley has the players. He does the interviews, and at 5 a.m. starts his story. He finishes precariously close to the 9 a.m. deadline, and phones in the story.

"Sorry Doug, didn't anyone tell you? Kansas beat Oklahoma. We're using your space for that story."

It's times like that that make Looney scratch his head in wonderment when his friends ask him, "When are you going to get a job?"

Still, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED writers are compensated in regal fashion for the demands placed upon them. Writer salaries range from \$30,000 all the way up to out-of-sight.

It's hard to imagine how much Dan Jenkins, author of SEMI-TOUGH, makes for a year's work at the magazine.

But the writer must pass a test of excellence, everytime he sits down to pen a story.

Looney goes into a sort of a trance, working for 12 hours at a stretch, rearranging paragraphs, starting over, getting everything just right. He doesn't even hear the phone ring.

When he finishes, his arms hang limp at his sides. He sometimes falls into bed exhausted.

Why does he push himself so hard? "That 12 hours, when I actually sit down to write a story, that's when I earn my money," he said.

Thousands of sports writers dream of earning their money in similar style.



Interviewing

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED writer Doug Looney interviews Charles and Harriet Woodard at the Hertford Cafe in hopes of getting some inside information on Jimmy Hunter.

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