

Baseball left its mark on John Strohmayer

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PROFILE

By HENRY MILLER

As the days warm, grass grows lush and green, bees buzz, and faint memories begin to stir in **John Strohmayer**.

Like a bear coming out of hibernation who's gotten up on the wrong side of the cave, he gets cranky, restless.

It's an annual but fading ritual for the Strohmayer family, a phenomenon known to ex-baseball players as spring training withdrawal.

The annual fix—the smell of well-oiled gloves, the crack of horsehide on ash and the dead-animal feel of the rosin bag—are all missing. The suitcases stay unpacked in the closet, the semi-reassuring anchor of a name taped on a locker in the clubhouse has been traded for the name stenciled on a mailbox.

What's left are the memories of seven years in the big leagues and playing for a World Series team when its members made their stretch run for the National League pennant.

Strohmayer, his major league pitching career cut short by a debilitating arm injury in 1975, lives a contented life with his wife Connie, who is a deputy city clerk for the city of Redding, and their three sons Steve, 11, Tim, 8, and Kevin, 5. He teaches history and algebra at Central Valley High School, coaches basketball for the Falcons and still aspires athletes what it takes to make it in the big leagues.

Looking at those athletes, Strohmayer remembers how it was for him.

John Emery Strohmayer was born Oct. 13, 1946, in Belle Fourche, S.D. When John was 2 years old, his parents, Emery and Esther, moved to a home his father, a cement mason, built in Central Valley.

He has a younger sister, Natalie Brock, who lives in Van Nuys.

Strohmayer showed his baseball prowess early, pitching every game for Central Valley High his sophomore and junior years with 9-1 and 7-2 records, respectively.

His senior year, when "we finally got a big left-hander," to relieve him, he went 4-1 on the mound for the Falcons.

Central Valley won the Northern Athletic League title in 1963 and '64.

He had several scholarship offers as a three-letter—baseball, basketball and football—athlete when he graduated from Central Valley in 1964, but opted for a baseball scholarship to University of the Pacific (UOP) in Stockton.

He had a football offer from Stanford, "but at 155 pounds, I didn't think I should do it," Strohmayer said with a laugh.

The honors continued to pile up at UOP, where he went 8-6 on the mound in his senior year, earned all-West Coast Athletic Conference first-team honors and was named the Tigers' most valuable player.

He received his bachelor's degree in history that year, was drafted by the Oakland A's and shipped to their single A team in Bradenton, Fla.

During his first two years in the minors, Strohmayer returned to UOP



JOHN STROHMAYER WITH BAT COMMEMORATING CHAMPIONSHIP IN 1973
New York Mets came from behind to win National League pennant that year

R-S photos by Gary Miller



JOHN, CONNIE STROHMAYER AND FAMILY
Timmy, front, Steve, and Kevin, on couch

in the off-seasons to earn his teaching credential.

He pitched about a month for Bradenton, then was bumped up to

another A's minor-league team in Virginia, the Peninsula Greys of the Carolina League.

Bradenton was a good experience

for him because it showed him the value of college athletics. Strohmayer said. During his stint at the rookie league club in Florida, he faced mostly players who joined the club straight out of high school.

"I felt I needed more time (after high school, when the Minnesota Twins had made him a contract offer). I could throw, I was wiry, but I knew I had to be a lot stronger," he said. "UOP was good training for me. At Bradenton, in the rookie league, it was like pitching against high school kids."

From the Peninsula team, he moved to the team's single A farm club, the Crushers, in Lodi, where he met his future wife in 1969. That same year, the A's sent him to Birmingham, Ala.

"I was following (A's minor leaguer) Vida Blue at the time," he said of the shuffle. "When he moved up, I would follow."

"At that time, the A's were loaded with pitching," he added, citing Jim "Catfish" Hunter and Chuck Dobson as examples.

So in December 1969, Strohmayer was sold to expansion franchise Montreal in a "straight cash deal."

The Expos "had been in the league one year and were looking for anyone who could throw the ball 60 feet, 6 inches," Strohmayer recalled.

Hoping for instant success, Montreal had a roster made up of well-scrubbed, fresh-faced rookies behind a crew of aging veterans, he said of the lineup.

"There was a real battle between (See INJURY Page 3)