

# Injury to pitching arm ended career in '75

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the oldies and the young players," he said. "They had Dick Rodatz and Elroy Face. Those were guys who were my heroes when I was in Little League."

The Montreal Expos galley, pulled by creaky veterans and squeaky rookies, had Gene Mauch at the helm, a fiery fireball perfectionist manager given to solar-flare-intensity "temper tantrums."

"He was such a brilliant man, it helped in some aspect and hurt him in some ways," Strohmayer said of Mauch. "We never hit it off personally to begin with. When I met him, he was straight from the old school where, as a rookie, you didn't say anything."

Strohmayer was the fireman for the Expos, a relief pitcher who chalked up a 3-1 record and pitched in 42 games in his debut year, 1970. But the on-again, off-again, plug-the-gaps role grated on him.

When he got discouraged, Claude Raymond, a 16-year veteran, helped lift his spirits.

"I was kind of his protege," Strohmayer said. "He said, 'Don't worry, your turn will come.'"

Connie and John were married after that first season in Montreal in October 1970.

After an off-season stint in Puerto Rico's winter leagues, Strohmayer had his best-ever exhibition season in 1971. At last, he thought, his turn was at hand.

"At spring training in 1971 I was optimistic I would get a chance to work," he said. "I had the best spring of any of our pitchers. I thought I'd get a chance to pitch, if not in the opener, at least in the second game."

But he collected splinters on the bench for seven weeks, filling in as always in relief, until Mauch penciled him in as the starter at San Francisco during the Memorial Day weekend.

Because he hadn't pitched a long stretch in almost two months, he was sent to Montreal's West Palm Beach, Fla., club for 10 days to "warm up" for the starting debut against the Giants. It was hell for the rookies he faced in the Florida State League, he recalled.

"I pitched against that team like I would a major-league lineup," Strohmayer said with a chuckle. "I went from pitching against the Daytona Beach Dodgers to the San Francisco Giants."

Strohmayer's parents and friends made a pilgrimage to Candlestick Park to watch him and, "I was a little nervous, needless to say."

After allowing three runs in the tight-gut first inning, Strohmayer settled down for five shutout innings before Bobby Bonds rapped an opposite-field home run that put him back on the bench.

The Expos eventually lost both games of the double-header and the Montreal players got a not-infrequent display of Mauch's temper in the locker room after the games.

The double-header had ground on late into the night and the players were ravenous, Strohmayer said, and there were several tubs of fried chicken in the locker room waiting for them.

Mauch dumped the tubs of chicken into a large trash can, then kicked the can over. "There was chicken legs and wings all over everywhere," Strohmayer said.

On a Montreal radio show, Mauch



STROHMAYER WITH WILLIE MAYS AND SON, STEVE  
Photo was taken in Mets' locker room in June 1973

had said, "I don't make mistakes. Sometimes the players don't produce," Strohmayer recalled.

His last season in Montreal, in 1972, "started off like the kind of season you dream about," Strohmayer said.

He pitched two shutout saves and pitched in 18 of the first 32 games of the season, at one point leading the National League in saves.

But then he was relegated to the bench, not winning another game until August. "I felt I was ready to be traded," he said.

The slumping New York Mets expressed interest in 1973 and Strohmayer was on his way.

If he had trouble getting to play with Montreal, there was no problem with the Mets.

Strohmayer's bath of fire came early. He was on the mound within an hour after reporting to the club.

"In a cab on the way over (to the Atlanta Braves stadium after flying down to catch the Mets on a road stint) I heard the National Anthem on the radio," he said with a smile, remembering. He checked in, put on his uniform and went to the dugout, where he was asked, "Why don't you go down to the bullpen?"

He wound up pitching two innings of shutout baseball in a losing effort.

During that stretch with the 1973 Mets, the team came from 11½ games behind to capture the National League pennant the last game of the season against the Cubs in Chicago.

Playing under Yogi Berra, then-manager of the Mets, was as different from dealing with Mauch as night and day, Strohmayer said. It was no secret that Berra was the lovable dim bulb of the major leagues.

"As a manager, here I go from one of the most brilliant to 'Oh my God,'" Strohmayer said. "It was a solid ball club and a more astute manager would have probably had

the team in first place most of the season."

Among the greats were Willie Mays, Tom Seaver, Tug McGraw, Cleon Jones, Rusty Staub, Jerry Grote and Duffy Dyer.

Strohmayer's Berra stories are legion, a staple when he speaks to groups. Among his favorites are:

Berra commenting on a restaurant — "It used to be a great restaurant, but nobody ever goes there anymore because it's too crowded."

Berra responding straight-faced to Don Hahn, asking how to improve his batting average — "If you get a pitch and think you can hit it, swing."

Berra, a standout catcher, said after receiving an award for his effort behind the plate — "I'd like to thank you all for making this evening necessary."

Strohmayer's blue eyes sparkle and his 6-foot frame is shaking with laughter as he recounts the Berra era. He's on a roll.

Berra once was asked, "I think it was by Curt Gowdy," what the intangibles are for the team. "I know about hitting and fielding," Strohmayer recalled Gowdy saying, "but tell me, Yogi, what are the intangibles that make a winning team?"

Berra replied, "The only intangibles I know are ('Campy') Camparis and Matty Alou."

Apparently, Strohmayer said, "Berra thought intangibles meant Latin Americans."

When asked to comment on the come-from-behind league pennant win, Berra said his now-famous "You're never out of it until you're out of it" line.

Strohmayer got to play in about 10 or 11 games during the drive to the pennant, but was sidelined by a nagging injury to his pitching arm. Seaver and McGraw exploded on the mound to put the Mets' record at 81-80 and clinch the pennant.

"There was nothing like it," Strohmayer said of the National League title win. "It was just fantastic. Everyone was on cloud nine."

Arm problems put him on the disabled list and sent him to the minors in Puerto Rico during the Mets' World Series against the Oakland A's.

Strohmayer remembers that "I watched the last game with Frank Robinson (then-manager of the Puerto Rico farm team) in a hotel room in San Juan," as the A's took the Series in the seventh game.

Placed on the roster of the Tides, the Mets' Tidewater League AAA team in Virginia, the arm got worse. "I'd throw a couple of innings and my fingers would get numb," he said.

Strohmayer visited specialists in New York, Puerto Rico and Redding before he got the answer from Dr. Robert Kerlan in Los Angeles.

"He knew immediately that the muscle fibers were stripped off, putting pressure on the ulnar nerve," he said. "At that point he said I had a decision to try and pitch and take painkillers or go in (for surgery) and have it (the torn muscle sheaths) scraped off."

Giving it one last shot, Strohmayer went to the Cleveland Indians farm club in Tucson, Ariz., in 1975.

"But I wasn't throwing effectively because of the pain," he said.

At that time, "my dad was ill, and my wife was pregnant with my second boy. I thought I should get away from it (baseball) for a while."

The Strohmayers moved to Southern California, then to Central Valley in September 1975.

"We came up here with no real job potential at all. I inquired about teaching jobs and there were none; school had already started," he said. "I started subbing (substitute teaching) at Junction School for about a year. There was an opening at Central Valley (High) in 1976."

From a life of sweet baseball contracts, teaching put "a rather severe cut in our standard of living," Strohmayer said, but it has been well worth it.

"I think I was always kind of a teacher even before I began teaching," he said.

He's now working for his master's degree in physical education at Chico State University.

"Sometimes, teaching is bitter-sweet because of what goes on," he said, citing the committee he's on that's trying to save 12 teachers' jobs in the face of budget cuts.

Baseball taught him lessons he communicates to his students and athletes at Central Valley.

"We, as teachers, tell students and players to give it your best. You should never look back and regret that you never gave it your best shot. I try to impress upon them to go out and try and do their best job, their best physical and mental effort. "I want to spread some of the things I learned."

And fondly recalling the high points of playing against and striking out the greats — Hank Aaron, Roberto Clemente, Pete Rose, Lou Brock, Willie Mays and others — he smiled and said, "It was part of my life and I'm satisfied that I was able to achieve a dream. I played on a World Series team and I'm very grateful for those moments."

And, measuring his life by his own standards, "I can look back and truthfully say I gave it my best shot."