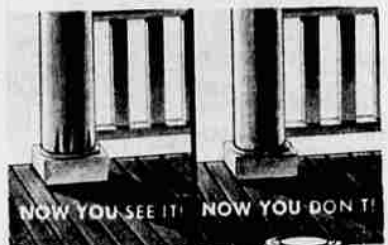


## WOOD ROTTING?

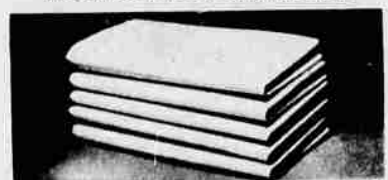


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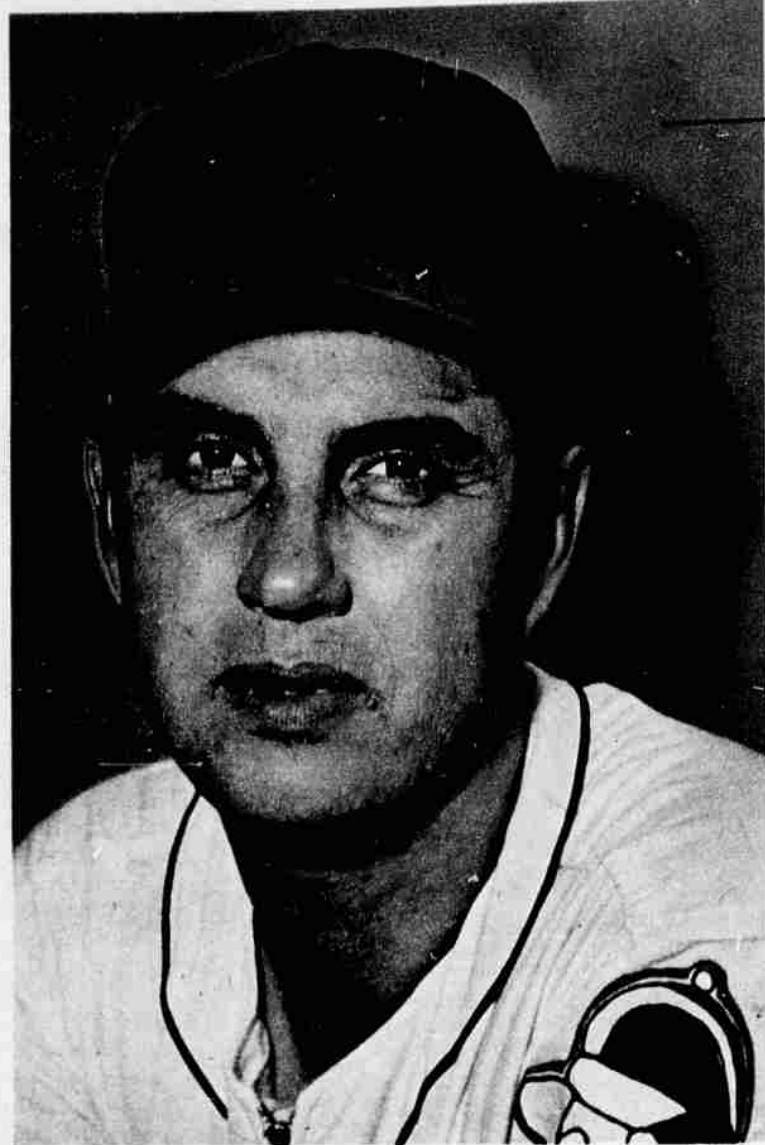


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## SPORTS



# HOYT

It was back to the bush leagues for this aging veteran until a canny manager and a fearless catcher revived his magic

by BOB DRISCOLL

# WILHELM:

*from skids to stardom*



PAUL RICHARDS, the fiery manager of the Baltimore Orioles, is recognized as a miracle worker when it comes to salvaging major-league flotsam. Under his careful guidance "misfits" who have drifted aimlessly in baseball suddenly have put Baltimore in contention for the first division.

Far and away, his prize-reclamation project is James Hoyt Wilhelm, a balding, 36-year-old knuckle-ball pitcher who was traded as "useless" three times in the past two years.

For the soft-spoken North Carolinian it looked as if Baltimore might be his last stop before going back to the minor leagues where he had toiled between 1942 and 1952. After early big-league success as a relief specialist with the New York Giants, Hoyt's career took a disastrous dip, and it looked as if he'd never right himself. He couldn't win for the St. Louis Cardinals after the Giants traded him, and when the Cardinals dealt him out of the National League to the Cleveland Indians, the best he could manage was a dismal 2-7 record.

So when Paul Richards decided to take a chance on him for the minimum \$20,000 major-league sale price, most experts believed this would be only a temporary reprieve for Wilhelm. Hoyt did, too.

But Richards had a special scheme hatching. Wilhelm had always been thought of as a relief specialist. He had appeared in 319 games with the Giants between 1952 and 1956, racking up an impressive 41-25 record, all in rescue efforts. In his freshman year, he toiled in 71 games, a club record for activity; characteristically he was the only player who didn't complain of overwork.

In 1956 he lost his effectiveness, which in a pitcher with a sound arm often is synonymous with a downbeat mental outlook. The confidence a relief pitcher needs in tense situations with runners on base suddenly vanished.

It appeared to be coincidental that at the time Hoyt was plagued by bad luck, Wes Westrum, the magnificent defensive catcher of the Giants who had handled Hoyt's darting knuckler exclusively, was fading badly. Some perceptive fans noted that no one else could handle "the craziest knuckle-ball in baseball," as Hoyt's bread-and-butter pitch has been described.

With someone other than Westrum catching, there was always a nagging doubt that spelled the difference in Hoyt's performance. Baseball has been referred to as a game of inches, and for Hoyt, Wes had been that inch in the right direction.

The problem was the same everywhere. St. Louis Cardinal backstops had no more success than the Giants', and the Indian catcher, J. W. Porter, tied an American League record by allowing four knuckle-balls to skitter past him in one game.

Before the Indians gave up on him, manager Bobby Bragan did one thing that was to make the difference for Hoyt: he gave him a starting assignment and Hoyt responded by pitching 12 innings, although in a losing cause. That effort found its place in Paul Richard's storehouse of significant facts and led to his scheme.

When Hoyt arrived in Baltimore, Richards told him: "You're a starting pitcher for me; no more relief except in spots."

Hoyt inherited brawny Gus Triandos as a battery-mate at Baltimore. To say the combination was successful would

be an understatement. Gus is the type of man who exudes quiet confidence. Hoyt felt it and showed it.

"The knuckler is Hoyt's best pitch and I call it 80-90 percent of the time," Gus says. "I know I don't look good pawing and lunging for it, dropping third strikes and having runners trot down to second for a stolen base while I'm wrestling with the ball, but I can take it if Wilhelm can. He's the toughest pitcher I ever caught, but it's a privilege to be on the same side. There's nobody just like Hoyt."

AT AN AGE, when most pitchers are worried about banishment to the bullpen, Wilhelm has "arrived" as the most dreaded starting pitcher in the American League. "He's the best in the majors," Richards boasts.

Last Sept. 20, shortly after coming to the Orioles, Wilhelm pitched a no-hitter against the Yankees. Triandos not only gave him defensive and moral support but blasted a home run to win it, 1-0. This season the rejuvenated Wilhelm picked up where he left off last year and won nine straight, including three shutouts, one of them a one-hit effort against the Yankees. A hot Detroit team finally pinned a 6-4 loss on him June 14.

While Hoyt was winning those games, Gus was hammering five of his 13 home runs to that date. He shrugs off the uncanny rapport that seems to exist between them. "I just happen to hit better when Hoyt is pitching. There's nothing more to it. I don't hit for psychological reasons—to make up for dropping pitches—as some people say."

Off the field the winning tandem aren't particular buddies. Hoyt is shy and retiring. He's one of 11 children and, as a youngster on a North Carolina farm, had to wait to say his piece, then say it carefully. The habit has never worn off. "Tilt," as his teammates call him because his head is always cocked at a slight angle, is one of the most popular men in the clubhouse although he's content to sit by his locker while the dressing room reverberates with horseplay. On the other hand, Gus is outgoing. He's an accomplished after-dinner speaker and won't hesitate to give his views on any subject, especially Hoyt.

"The fellow who said Hoyt's knuckler is 'the next best thing to an invisible pitch' wasn't far off," he says. "Remember Mantle? Hoyt had his number so good, Mantle tried hitting against him righthanded one game. I asked him if his old shoulder injury stopped him from swinging southpaw. 'Heck, no. It's just as easy to take my cuts righty. I'd try a tennis racket if they'd let me.'"

Hoyt doesn't search for reasons for his new-found success. "I'm glad of it, but there's nothing to explain."

Hoyt, his wife and their three children have taken a house in Baltimore, and it looks as if they'll be settled there for a while. The jinx that dogged him appears to be behind now, thanks to Hoyt Wilhelm's own determination and two gentlemen named Richards and Triandos who had faith in him when everyone else didn't.

# CLEAN CLEAR THROUGH

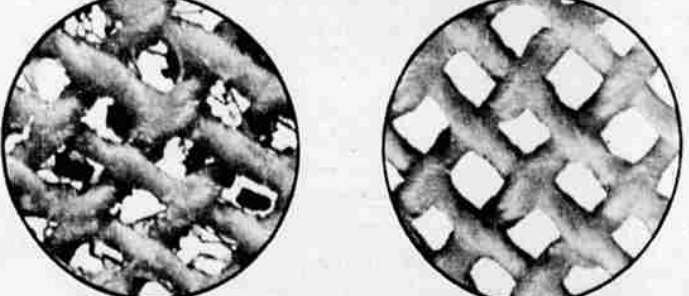
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