

= Hoyt Wilhelm =

James Hoyt Wilhelm ( July 26 , 1922 ? August 23 , 2002 ) , nicknamed " Old Sarge " , was an American Major League Baseball ( MLB ) pitcher with the New York Giants , St. Louis Cardinals , Cleveland Indians , Baltimore Orioles , Chicago White Sox , California Angels , Atlanta Braves , Chicago Cubs , and Los Angeles Dodgers between 1952 and 1972 . He is a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame .

After growing up in North Carolina and fighting in World War II , Wilhelm spent several years in the minor leagues before starting his MLB career . He was best known for his knuckleball , which enabled him to have great longevity . He appeared occasionally as a starting pitcher , but he pitched mainly as a specialist relief man , a role in which he won 124 games , still the record for relief pitchers . He was the first pitcher to reach 200 saves and the first to appear in 1 @, @ 000 games .

Wilhelm , who did not enter the major leagues until his late twenties , pitched until he was nearly 50 years old . Wilhelm retired with one of the lowest career earned run averages in baseball history . After retiring as a player in the early 1970s , he held coaching roles with the New York Yankees and Atlanta Braves for many years . He was a longtime resident of Sarasota , Florida , where he died in a nursing home of heart failure in 2002 .

= = Early life = =

Wilhelm was one of eleven children born to poor tenant farmers John and Ethel ( née Stanley ) Wilhelm in Huntersville , North Carolina . He played baseball at Cornelius High School in Cornelius , North Carolina . There , he began experimenting with a knuckleball after reading about pitcher Dutch Leonard . He felt that , because he could not throw fast , honing a knuckleball offered him his best shot at success . He used a tennis ball to practice .

Wilhelm made his professional debut with the Mooresville Moors of the Class @-@ D North Carolina State League in 1942 . He served in the United States Army in the European Theater during World War II . Wilhelm participated in the Battle of the Bulge , where he was wounded , earning the Purple Heart for his actions . He played his entire career with a piece of shrapnel lodged in his back as a result of this injury . He rose to the rank of staff sergeant . Wilhelm was nicknamed " Old Sarge " because of his service in the military .

He returned to the Moors in 1946 , following his military service . Over the 1946 and 1947 seasons , Wilhelm earned 41 wins with Mooresville . He later recalled being dropped from a Class D minor league team and having the manager tell him to forget about the knuckleball , but he persisted with it . The Boston Braves purchased Wilhelm from Mooresville in 1947 . On November 20 , 1947 , Wilhelm was drafted by the New York Giants from the Braves in the 1947 minor league draft .

Wilhelm 's first assignment in the Giants organization was in Class B with the 1948 Knoxville Smokies , for whom he registered 13 wins and 9 losses . He spent a few games that season with the Class A Jacksonville Tars of the South Atlantic League . Wilhelm returned to Jacksonville in 1949 , earning a 17 ? 12 win @-@ loss record and a 2 @.@ 66 earned run average ( ERA ) . With the Class AAA Minneapolis Millers in 1950 , Wilhelm was the starting pitcher in 25 of his 35 games pitched , registering a 15 ? 11 record with a 4 @.@ 95 ERA . His ERA came down to 3 @.@ 94 in 1951 with Minneapolis , but his record finished at 11 ? 14 . Wilhelm had been used in a similar role that season , mostly starting games but also making eleven relief appearances .

= = Major league career = =

= = = Early years = = =

Though Wilhelm was primarily a starting pitcher in the minor leagues , he had been called up to a Giants team whose strong starting pitchers had led them to a National League ( NL ) pennant the year before . Giants manager Leo Durocher did not think that Wilhelm 's knuckleball approach would

be effective for more than a few innings at a time . He assigned Wilhelm to the team 's bullpen .

Wilhelm made his MLB debut with the Giants on April 18 , 1952 at age 29 , giving up a hit and two walks while only recording one out . On April 23 , 1952 , in his second game with the New York Giants , Wilhelm batted for the first time in the majors . Facing rookie Dick Hoover of the Boston Braves , Wilhelm hit a home run over the short right @-@ field fence at the Polo Grounds . Although he went to bat a total of 432 times in his career , he never hit another home run .

Pitching exclusively in relief , Wilhelm led the NL with a 2 @.@ 43 ERA in his rookie year . He won 15 games and lost three . Wilhelm finished in the top ten in Most Valuable Player Award voting that season , becoming the first relief pitcher to finish that high . He finished second in the Rookie of the Year Award voting . Wilhelm made 69 relief appearances in 1953 , his win @-@ loss record decreased to 7 ? 8 and he issued 77 walks against 71 strikeouts . Wilhelm was named to the NL All @-@ Star team that year , but he did not play in the game because team manager Charlie Dressen did not think that any of the catchers could handle his knuckleball . The Giants renewed Wilhelm 's contract in February 1954 .

In 1954 , Wilhelm was a key piece of the pitching staff that led the 1954 Giants to a world championship . He pitched 111 innings , finishing with a 12 ? 4 record and a 2 @.@ 10 ERA . During one of Wilhelm 's appearances that season , catcher Ray Katt committed four passed balls in one inning to set the major league record ; the record has subsequently been tied twice . When Stan Musial set a record by hitting five home runs in a doubleheader that year , Wilhelm was pitching in the second game and gave up two of the home runs . The 1954 World Series represented Wilhelm 's only career postseason play . He pitched 2 1 ? 3 innings over two games , earning a save in the third game . The team won the World Series in a four @-@ game sweep .

Wilhelm 's ERA increased to 3 @.@ 93 over 59 games and 103 innings pitched in 1955 , but he managed a 4 ? 1 record . He finished the 1956 season with a 4 ? 9 record and a 3 @.@ 83 ERA in 89 1 ? 3 innings . Sportswriter Bob Driscoll later attributed Wilhelm 's difficulties in the mid @-@ 1950s to the decline in the career of Giants catcher Wes Westrum , writing that baseball was " a game of inches , and for Hoyt , Wes had been that inch in the right direction . "

= = = Middle career = = =

On February 26 , 1957 , Wilhelm was traded by the Giants to the St. Louis Cardinals for Whitey Lockman . At the time of the trade , St. Louis manager Fred Hutchinson described Wilhelm as the type of pitcher who " makes us a definite pennant threat ... He 'll help us where we need help the most . " In 40 games with the Cardinals that season , he earned 11 saves but finished with a 1 ? 4 record and his highest ERA to that point in his career ( 4 @.@ 25 ) . The Cardinals placed him on waivers in September and he was claimed by the Cleveland Indians , who used him in two games that year .

In 1958 , Cleveland manager Bobby Bragan used Wilhelm occasionally as a starter . Although he had a 2 @.@ 49 ERA , none of the Indians ' catchers could handle Wilhelm 's knuckleball . General manager Frank Lane , alarmed at the large number of passed balls , allowed the Baltimore Orioles to select Wilhelm off waivers on August 23 , 1958 . In Baltimore , Wilhelm lived near the home of third baseman Brooks Robinson and their families became close friends . On September 20 of that year , Wilhelm no @-@ hit the eventual World Champion New York Yankees 1 @-@ 0 at Memorial Stadium , in only his ninth career start . He allowed two baserunners on walks and struck out eight . The no @-@ hitter had been threatened at one point in the ninth inning when Hank Bauer bunted along the baseline , but Robinson allowed the ball to roll and it veered foul . The no @-@ hitter was the first in the franchise 's Baltimore history ; the Orioles had moved from St. Louis after the 1953 season .

Orioles catchers had difficulty catching the Wilhelm knuckleball again in 1959 and they set an MLB record with 49 passed balls . During one April game , catcher Gus Triandos had four passed balls while catching for Wilhelm and he described the game as " the roughest day I ever put in during my life . " Author Bill James has written that Wilhelm and Triandos " established the principle that a knuckleball pitcher and a big , slow catcher make an awful combination . " Triandos once said , "

Heaven is a place where no one throws a knuckleball . "

Despite the passed balls , Wilhelm won the American League ERA title with a 2 @. @ 19 ERA . During the 1960 season , Orioles manager Paul Richards devised a larger mitt so his catchers could handle the knuckleball . Richards was well equipped with starting pitchers during that year . By the middle of the season , he said that eight of his pitchers could serve as starters . Wilhelm started 11 of the 41 games in which he appeared . He earned an 11 ? 8 record , a 3 @. @ 31 ERA and seven saves . He only started one game the following year , but he was an All @- @ Star , registered 18 saves and had a 2 @. @ 30 ERA .

In 1962 , Wilhelm had his fourth All @- @ Star season , finishing with a 7 ? 10 record , a 1 @. @ 94 ERA and 15 saves . On January 14 , 1963 , Wilhelm was traded by the Orioles with Ron Hansen , Dave Nicholson and Pete Ward to the Chicago White Sox for Luis Aparicio and Al Smith . Early in that season , White Sox manager Al López said that Wilhelm had improved his pitching staff by 40 percent . He said that Wilhelm was " worth more than a 20 @- @ game winner , and he works with so little effort that he probably can last as long as Satchel Paige . " He registered 21 saves and a 2 @. @ 64 ERA .

In 1964 , Wilhelm finished with career highs in both saves ( 27 ) and games pitched ( 73 ) . His ERA decreased to 1 @. @ 99 that season ; it remained less than 2 @. @ 00 through the 1968 season . In 1965 , Wilhelm contributed to another passed balls record when Chicago catcher J. C. Martin allowed 33 of them in one season . That total set a modern single @- @ season baseball record for the category . Wilhelm 's career @- @ low ERA ( 1 @. @ 31 ) came in 1967 , when he earned an 8 ? 3 record for the White Sox with 12 saves .

In the 1968 season , Wilhelm was getting close to breaking the all @- @ time games pitched record belonging to Cy Young ( 906 games ) . Chicago manager Eddie Stanky began to think about using Wilhelm as a starting pitcher for game number 907 . However , the White Sox fired Stanky before the record came up . Wilhelm later broke the record as a relief pitcher . He also set MLB records for consecutive errorless games by a pitcher , career victories in relief , games finished and innings pitched in relief . Despite Wilhelm 's success , the White Sox , who had won at least 83 games per season in the 1960s , performed poorly . They finished 1968 with a 67 ? 95 record .

Wilhelm was noted during this period for his mentoring of relief pitcher Wilbur Wood , who came to the 1967 White Sox in a trade . Wood sometimes threw a knuckleball upon his arrival in Chicago , but Wilhelm encouraged him to throw it full @- @ time . By 1968 , Wood won 13 games , saved 16 games and earned a 1 @. @ 87 ERA . He credited Wilhelm with helping him to master the knuckleball , as the White Sox coaches did not know much about how to throw it . Between 1968 and 1970 , Wood pitched in more games ( 241 ) than any other pitcher and more innings ( 400 1 ? 3 ) than any other relief pitcher .

After the 1968 season , MLB expanded and an expansion draft was conducted in which the new teams could select certain players from the established teams . The White Sox left Wilhelm unprotected , possibly because they did not believe that teams would have interest in a much older pitcher . On October 15 , 1968 , Wilhelm was chosen in the expansion draft by the Kansas City Royals as the 49th pick . That offseason , he was traded by the Royals to the California Angels for Ed Kirkpatrick and Dennis Paepke .

= = = Later career = = =

In 44 games pitched for the 1969 California Angels , Wilhelm had a 2 @. @ 47 ERA , ten saves and a 5 ? 7 record . On September 8 , 1969 , Wilhelm was traded by the Angels with Bob Priddy to the Atlanta Braves for Clint Compton and Mickey Rivers . He finished the 1969 season by pitching eight games for the Braves , earning four saves and recording a 0 @. @ 73 ERA over 12 1 ? 3 innings pitched . Wilhelm spent most of the 1970 season with the Braves , pitching in 50 games for the team and earning ten saves .

On September 21 , 1970 , Wilhelm was selected off waivers by the Chicago Cubs , for whom he appeared in three games . He was traded back by the Cubs to the Braves for Hal Breeden after the season . As the Cubs acquired Wilhelm late in the season to bolster their playoff contention , which

was a source of controversy , Commissioner Bowie Kuhn investigated the transaction . In December , Kuhn ruled that he did not find evidence of impropriety associated with the transactions that sent Wilhelm to the Cubs and quickly back to the Braves .

Wilhelm was released by the Braves on June 29 , 1971 , having pitched in three games for that year 's Braves . He signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers on July 10 , 1971 . He appeared in nine MLB games for the Dodgers , giving up two earned runs in 17 2 / 3 innings . He also pitched in eight games that season for the team 's Class AAA minor league affiliate , the Spokane Indians . He started six of those games and registered a 3 .69 ERA . He pitched in 16 games for the Dodgers in 1972 , registering a 4 .62 ERA over 25 innings . The Dodgers released him on July 21 , 1972 . He never appeared in another game .

At the time of his retirement , Wilhelm had pitched in a then @-@ MLB record 1 @, @ 070 games . He is recognized as the first pitcher to have saved 200 games in his career , and the first pitcher to appear in 1 @, @ 000 games . He is also one of the oldest players to have pitched in the major leagues ; his final appearance was 16 days short of his 50th birthday . Wilhelm retired with the lowest career earned run average of any major league hurler after 1927 ( Walter Johnson ) who pitched more than 2 @, @ 000 innings .

= = Later life = =

After his retirement as a player , Wilhelm managed two minor league teams in the Atlanta Braves system for single seasons . He led the 1973 Greenwood Braves of the Western Carolinas League to a 61 ? 66 record , then had a 33 ? 33 record with the 1975 Kingsport Braves of the Appalachian League . He also worked as a minor league pitching coach for the New York Yankees for 22 years . As a coach , Wilhelm said that he did not teach pitchers the knuckleball , believing that people had to be born with a knack for throwing it . He sometimes worked individually with major league players who wanted to improve their knuckleballs , including Joe Niekro . The Yankees gave Wilhelm permission to work with Mickey Lolich in 1979 even though Lolich pitched for the San Diego Padres .

Wilhelm was on the ballot for the Baseball Hall of Fame for eight years before he was elected . After Wilhelm failed to garner enough votes for induction in 1983 , sportswriter Jim Murray criticized the voters , saying that while Wilhelm never had the look of a baseball player , he was " the best player in history at what he does . " He fell short by 13 votes in 1984 . Wilhelm was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1985 . At his induction ceremony , he said that he had achieved all three of his initial major league goals : appearing in a World Series , being named to an All @-@ Star team , and throwing a no @-@ hitter .

He and his wife Peggy lived in Sarasota , Florida . They raised three children together : Patti , Pam , and Jim . Wilhelm died of heart failure in a Sarasota nursing home in 2002 .

= = Legacy = =

Wilhelm was known as a " relief ace " and his teams used him in a new way that became a trend . Rather than bringing in a relief pitcher only when the starting pitcher had begun to struggle , teams increasingly called upon their relief pitchers toward the end of any close game . Wilhelm was the first relief pitcher elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame .

He is also remembered as one of the most successful and " probably the most famous ' old ' player in history . " Although , due largely to his military service , he did not debut in the major leagues until he was already 29 years old , Wilhelm nonetheless managed to appear in 21 major league seasons . He earned the nickname " Old Folks " while he still had more than a decade left in his playing career . He was the oldest player in Major League Baseball for each of his final seven seasons .

Former teammate Moose Skowron commented on Wilhelm 's key pitch , saying , " Hoyt was a good guy , and he threw the best knuckleball I ever saw . You never knew what Hoyt 's pitch would do . I don 't think he did either . " Baseball executive Roland Hemond agreed , saying , " Wilhelm 's knuckleball did more than anyone else 's ... There was so much action on it . " Before Wilhelm , the

knuckleball was primarily mixed in to older pitchers ' repertoires at the end of their careers to offset their slowing fastballs and reduce stress on their arms , thereby extending their careers . Wilhelm broke with tradition when he began throwing the pitch as a teenager and on nearly every pitch . The New York Times linked his knuckleball with that of modern pitcher R.A. Dickey , as Wilhelm taught pitcher Charlie Hough the knuckleball in 1971 and Hough taught it to Dickey while coaching with the Texas Rangers .