

Cleveland Sports Vault: Tribe Knuckleballer Tom Candiotti

Written by {ga=googleph2}

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(Reminiscing) *I threw the Red Dart, which broke sharply down left or right...*

There was the Blue Bayou. I'd even tell the hitter I was about to throw it. I'd mouth the words slowly, which contrasted with the actual pitch- my best fastball.

The Riser was a fun, sidearm pitch. I could always get the hitter to swing at it, but it was feast or famine for me: it spun on a vertical axis, and was supposed to break upwards. If it did, it was an "out" pitch. If it didn't, it just floated to the plate, looking like a ball on a tee to the hitter.

Then there was the roundhouse curve and the sweeping scroogie, which were basically the same pitch, only one was the exact opposite of the other.

Depending on which side of the ball the holes were on.

You've thrown some of these pitches- right?

The last pitch in my Wiffle Ball arsenal was another favorite of every kid I knew.

Everyone who's played catch with any kind of baseball has dabbled with it: The knuckleball. The pitch without spin, which can break unpredictably on its way to the plate.

When Tom Candiotti began throwing his knuckleballs with the Cleveland Indians in 1986, there were only four starters in the major leagues who threw the pitch: Candiotti, Charlie Hough, and the Niekro brothers, Phil and Joe. 300 game-winner Phil was a fellow starter on the Tribe staff, and was a tutor for Candiotti as he mastered the pitch. At one point late in Candiotti's career- when Charlie Hough retired- the Candy Man was the only knuckler in the bigs. Guys like Tim Wakefield, Steve Sparks and Dennis Springer eventually arrived to carry the mantle as practitioners of the craft.

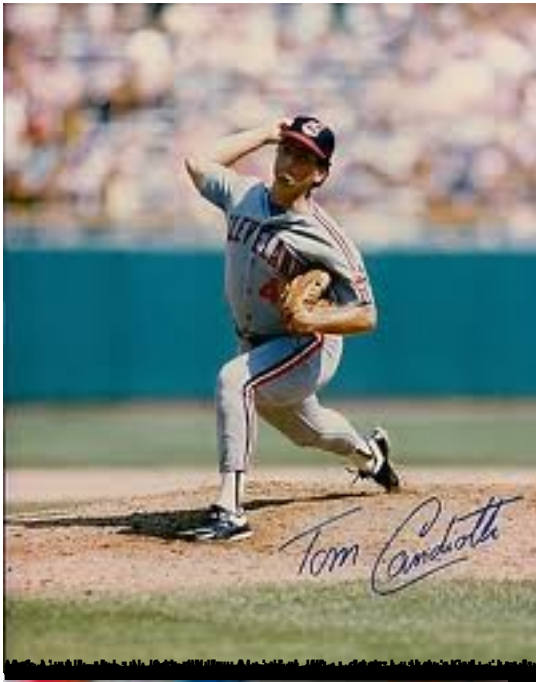
So there has been a scarcity of knuckleball pitchers in the major leagues during various eras. This has caused some to lament the eventual extinction of the pitch, or to label it a fad. But the pitch has been around since before 1910. (What a fascinating time in the history of baseball, when all types of pitches were being invented. Rumors abounded at the time about who was throwing what, and where.) One description of a specialty pitch from that time was that of a "dry spitter", but *The Neyer/James Guide to Pitchers* notes that a photo of the baseball grip showed the first knuckles of the index and middle fingers touching the ball. (Of course, the traditional knuckleball grip eventually developed into the jabbing of the fingernails of the index and middle finger into the cover of the baseball.) The 1940s were perhaps the golden years of the knuckleball, when the Washington Senators starting staff featured four knuckleball pitchers. The Indians' Gene Bearden, a hero of the 1948 World Series champions as a rookie, threw the knuckleball.

The pitcher's game preparation focuses as much on fingernail trimming as on mechanics and arm strength and endurance. (It has been said that a spitball achieves the effect of a knuckleball. My feeling is that yes: the slippery area of a spitball makes the ball aerodynamically unstable, causing it to break suddenly on the way to the plate. But while a spitter may achieve the effect of 'falling off the table', a knuckleball can break down, sideways- and up. Sometimes even on the same pitch).

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