

'72 Rewind: Wilbur Wood & the Art of the Knuckleball

(The Chicago Baseball Museum will pay tribute to Dick Allen and the 1972 White Sox in a June 25 fundraiser at U.S. Cellular Field. We will chronicle the events of that epic season here in the weeks ahead. Sport magazine published this story in its August, 1972 edition.)

By Al Hirshberg

Posted on Monday, May 7

You look at Wilbur Wood's broad shoulders and solid six-foot frame and if you didn't know otherwise you would think he won 22 games for the White Sox last year by overpowering hitters with a blazing fastball and an exploding curve. But it's not power that made Wood the anchorman of the Chicago staff. This chubby

faceted competitor with a soft Boston accent plucked himself from the jaws of oblivion by learning to control baseball's most delicate and baffling pitch – the knuckleball.



"I have no idea of what any pitch of mine will do," says Wilbur Wood of his knuckleball.

Wood is the natural heir to and indeed the product of the ageless Hoyt Wilhelm, who went south last spring with the Dodgers on the eve of his 49th birthday. Except for Wilhelm, today Wood might be commuting between his Lexington home and a nine-to-five job in downtown Boston. Or, if he still were in baseball after seven years of mediocrity, he would be winning in the minors and losing in the majors as he had been doing before he mastered the knuckler.

Because of Wilhelm, life as a star is beginning at 30 for Wood. He will make \$60,000 this season and more each succeeding season, and God knows where it will all end. By perfecting the one legal pitch that drives hitters up the ivy, Wood, barring utter disaster, can look down the long, wide road of a prosperous future which would could last ten to 15 years.

Wilhelm was with the White Sox when Wood joined them in 1967 after a winning season with Columbus in the International League the year before. The old knuckleball master went right to work making a new one of the then 26-year-old journeyman ballplayer who had already pitched for nine teams in seven years without making much impression on any of them.

"The first thing Wilhelm did after I approached him for help was ask how long I had been monkeying with the knuckler," Wood recalled. "When I told him I had been using it off and one since junior high school in Belmont, Massachusetts, he was satisfied."

"That was lesson one: *Don't try to throw the knuckleball as an adult unless you threw it as a kid.*"

“This,” says Wood, “is why so many older pitchers fail with the knuckler. Most of them are over 30 when they first try it. At that age, there's no way you can control the knuckler as a brand new pitch.”

Asked why, Wood shrugged and said, “That's what I asked Hoyt. He said he didn't know. I have long since learned that if he doesn't know, nobody does. He is not *an* authority on the knuckleball. He's *the* authority. No man, living or dead, ever knew as much about that pitch as Hoyt Wilhelm.”

Wood soon learned lesson two from the Book of Wilhelm: *Don't try to be a part-time knuckleball pitcher. There ain't no such animal.*

“Hoyt never told me to drop my other pitches,” Wood said. “He just said to throw the knuckler 90 percent of the time – that I'd lose it if I didn't.”

So Wood throws his knuckler 90 percent of the time. The other 10 percent he throws a fastball that looks faster now than it did, and a curve which now seems to break sharper now than it used to.

“The fastball is no faster and the curve doesn't break any sharper,” Wood explained. “They just *look* faster and *seem* to break sharper to hitters who have gone half nuts looking at knuckleballs.”

Lesson three: *Never let the ball spin. It won't if you throw it overhand and straight without breaking the wrist.* (Rookie Burt Hooten of the Cubs has made quite a noise this season with a pitch that is thrown with a knuckleball grip but with a breaking motion that causes it to spin. This is not a true knuckleball; it is a new pitch – or the closest thing the majors have seen to a new pitch in some time – and is now generally known as a knuckle curve.

“Keeping the ball from spinning has been my biggest problem,” Wood said. “When you learn to do that you have just about mastered the pitch.”

Lesson four: *throw every day.*

“The only times I threw every day were in the bullpen,” Wood said. “Even there, I would sometimes miss a day if I had worked relief the day before. But then, with Hoyt's encouragement, I never missed a day, whether I worked long relief or not. And now that I'm a starting pitcher, I still don't miss a day.”

Wood really didn't need lesson five: *Don't panic if your knuckler isn't working today. It will come back tomorrow.* Wood never panics. From the day he signed a Red Sox farm contact for a reported bonus of \$30,000 right after he graduated from Belmont High School in 1960, he has always been the calmest man on the ballfield, even when things were going sour. And before he became a knuckleball pitcher Wood's career was a clas-

sic of futility. His control, very good from the start, helped him in the minors, where he could get by with that, a fair fastball, a fair curve and a fair change. But it ruined him in the majors, where it was too good. Good control without enough speed or deception made Wood a patsy for big-league hitters who knew their business.

The Red Sox first brought Wood up near the end of the 1961 season, after he had struck out more than three times as many men as he walked (103 strikeouts, 33 walks) at Winston-Salem in the Carolina League. Only 19 years old, Wood had no chance to make it in Boston, and he started the 1962 season with York in the Eastern League.

Once again, he looked good as a minor-leaguer. He led the Eastern League in innings pitched, with 219, had a 15-11 won-lost record and a reasonable earned run average of 2.84. But his most impressive statistic, as it was been at Winston-Salem, was his ratio of strikeouts to walks. While not quite three to one, it was close, for Wood struck out 178 and walked only 62. He spent the last few weeks of the season back in Boston, but appeared in only one game.

The Red Sox sent him to Seattle in the Pacific Coast League for the 1963 season, but they were watching him closely. "We felt all he needed was experience," said Ed Kenney, now Red Sox director of minor-league clubs, and at that time assistant farm director. "He had improved every year in faster and faster minor-league company. He was big enough to get more zip on his fastball and his control was outstanding. But he never developed and the Pirates picked him up after we sent him to the minors for the third time."

As usual, Wood looked great in the minors and no better than fair in the majors. He led the Pacific Coast League in 1964 and International League in 1966 in complete games, but got nowhere with the Pirates. They sold him to the White Sox at the end of the 1966 season.

It was then that Wood realized he'd never be a major-leaguer depending on normal pitches.

But that realization didn't shake his confidence; he just decided he'd have to find another route to success, which meant another pitch.

Nothing can really shake Wood's confidence. Although not a braggart, he is sure he can do anything within reason – like pitching and winning both games of a doubleheader. The possibility of duplicating a stunt that hasn't been pulled in nearly a half century (Emil Levens of Cleveland did it last in 1926) first occurred to Wood after a loss. When he dropped the first game of a doubleheader to the Yankees in New York, 3-2, one day last summer White Sox manager Chuck Tanner told him to do as he pleased during the second game.

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"You nuts?" Tanner said.

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“Well next time you win the first, maybe you can pitch the second if you feel like it.”

“Later,” Tanner said, “we actually announced Wilbur would pitch both games of a doubleheader in Boston if he won the first, but he didn't. We'll never announce it again or even talk with Wilbur about it in advance. But some day after winning one, we'll just let him go out and work the second if he wants to. I'm sure he could do it.”

Wood thinks anyone can do it if conditions are right. “It all depends on the length of the first game,” he said. “If a guy doesn't have a lot of walks and strikeouts or full counts so he throws less than a hundred pitches, he should be able to come back for the second game. It doesn't matter of what kind of pitcher he is.”

While that may be debatable, there's no question that a knuckleball pitcher could do it after a quick first game. Once mastered, the knuckler is easier on the arm than any other pitch. This and the fact that Wood is young and strong make it quite possible for him to match Levensen's feat of 46 years ago.

There are few knuckleball specialists in the big leagues today, and all but Wood and Phil Niekro of the Braves are relief pitchers. Niekro was the first major-league knuckleballer in history to win 20 games – he won 23 in 1969 – and Wood was the second. Wilhelm never won more than 15. And in those early years of his career Wilhelm was not exclusively a knuckleball pitcher. Only after he dropped all his other pitches did he become one of the most consistent relievers baseball ever knew.

Wood himself had been the game's busiest and best relief pitcher before the White Sox made him a starter last season. Even then he fell into the club's regular pitching rotation by accident. If Joe Horlen had not had knee surgery the day before the season began, the best Wood could have hoped for was an occasional chance as a spot starter. Tommy John, Tom Bradley, Bart Johnson and Horlen were the four regulars.

With Horlen out, Wood moved in as the fourth man. Long before the season ended he was the ace of the White Sox staff and one of the top three pitchers in the American League. Only Oakland's Vida Blue and Detroit's Mickey Lolich won more games and only Blue had a better earned run average.

Cold statistics explain what Wood really means to the White Sox as a starter instead of a reliever. Last year he pitched 334 innings, the most for a White Sox pitcher since 1917 and more than half Wood's own total for the previous four seasons. His 22 victories were more than any other White Sox pitcher had won in a dozen years. His 210 strikeouts helped the pitching staff break a club record and left Wood third in the 71-year

history of the team. His 1.91 ERA was the lowest for a White Sox starter in more than half a century.

Aside from his outstanding statistics and the knuckler itself, Wood is distinct among pitchers in several other respects. He works very rapidly, never wasting a moment. He rarely goes to the resin bag. He often gets the side out on astonishingly few pitches. And instead of starting strong and weakening later, something many pitches do, Wood starts slowly and comes on strong. The reason is that he depends on precise control which, for him, usually takes about an inning of actual competition to develop. Other pitchers depend on the power and strength which they have in abundance when fresh.

Wood pitched a typical Wilbur Wood game when the White Sox opened this year's delayed season at Kansas City on April 15. Steve Hovley, the game's leadoff man for the Royals, bled a single through the infield and Paul Schaal, the second batter, reached on an error, a mess that Wood promptly pitched his way out of. Hovley was cut down trying to steal third, Cookie Rojas was in infield out and Lou Piniella popped up.

With all that activity, Wood threw only 15 pitches to the four batters he faced in the first inning. Counting the last two outs of the first inning, he retired ten men in a row before Piniella doubled off him in the fourth. The ten outs took only 31 pitches.

For eight innings, Wood and Dick Drago of the Royals were locked in a scoreless tie, broken by Dick Allen's homer in the White Sox ninth. Wood blew his chances for the victory when, with two out in the Royals' ninth, he hung a knuckler on Bob Oliver and the Kansas City outfielder, who had eight homers in 1971, belted one into the seats to tie the game. Wood got Jerry May on a popup to finish the ninth, then left for a pinch-hitter in the White Sox tenth with the score tied at 1-1. Neither he nor Drago were around when the Royals won in the 11th.

The nine innings Wood pitched took a shade over two hours to play, during which he threw but 92 pitches. He got the Royals out once on six pitches, twice on seven and twice on eight. Only in the fifth, when he threw 17 pitches (he had two strikeouts and Bobby Floyd fouled off a couple) did Wood throw more than the 15 it had taken him to get through the first. His control was so close to perfect that he walked only one man and fanned five. Except for Oliver's homer, all of the seven hits he gave were bleeders or Texas Leaguers just out of the reach of somebody. One was a bunt. If anyone in addition to Allen had provided Wood with offensive support he would have won in nine easy innings.

Because of his control and the ease of throwing the knuckleball, Wood's strength is the strength of two. "We can get along with a rotation of three starting pitchers if we have to," says Tanner. "Wood, two other guys, and Wood. He pitched with only two days' rest 14 times last year. Won most of his games and had an ERA of around 1.00."

Wood doesn't see anything unusual about that. Neither does Johnny Sain, the pitching coach who helped Tanner make the decision to transform Wood from a reliever to a starter. Sain knows all about pitching with two days' rest. He and Warren Spahn

pitched the 1948 Boston Braves to the pennant by sharing most of the work that September. The late Boston sports columnist, Johnny Gillooly, immortalized the two in doggeral verse by attributing the club's success to "Spahn and Sain and a day of rain."

While disclaiming credit for Wood's unexpected success, Sain, generally acknowledged as the best pitching coach in baseball, does help Wood correct basic mistakes when things go wrong. "I never threw a knuckler, but otherwise Wood's method of pitching is very similar to mine," Sain says. "He varies speeds, as I did. He can pitch a lot, as I did – every breaking-ball pitcher must pitch a lot to keep sharp. Wood never gets upset on the mound. Neither did I. A fastball pitcher can blow his stack and work off his anger by just rearing back and firing as hard as he can. A finesse pitcher is dead if he gets red-necked. Because I did things Woody's way I can relate to him, and I think that's why I can help him at times.

Wood talks about his knuckler the way a loving mother talks about a new baby. When he picks up a ball to demonstrate, he fondles it.

The knuckler is really a fingertip pitch, involving only the first two fingers of the pitching hand, in Wood's case the left. While holding the ball, his thumb, ring finger and pinky are all in the same position as for any other pitch. But only the tips of the first two fingers rest on the ball, and no finger touches the seam. The pitch is thrown with a natural overhand motion and is so easy on the arm because there is no twisting or turning of elbow or wrist.

"Other than the position of the first two fingers," Wood explained, "the big thing is to keep all your fingers off the seam so the ball won't rotate more than one and a half times on its way to the plate. Wilhelm's knuckler doesn't even rotate that much. The least spin beyond a revolution and a half will keep the ball from breaking and make it act like a hanging curve."

He paused, shook his head, and grinned.

"Brother," he said, "when your knuckler spins they'll hit it a long way – a long, long way. That means anybody, not just a power hitter. Ike Brown of the Tigers has hit less than 20 home runs in his three years in the big leagues. The longest, which just missed going out of Comiskey Park in Chicago, was off me."

Now he was laughing, a merry deep-throated laugh, for Wood never laughs longer or louder than when laughing at himself. Overhearing him, a neighboring player remarked, "Cheez, he must have just pulled one of his practical jokes or told a story on himself."

Wood's practical jokes are standard operating procedure in the White Sox locker room. Aside from the conventional hotfoot, at which he is an expert, Wood spends a good deal of his spare time thinking up gags so complicated they sometimes take months to burst into flower.

There was the time early last season when he began collecting Johnny Sain's cigar butts. Since Sain is an inveterate cigar smoker, the pile of butts in the box where Wood kept them grew like Topsy, and by Labor Day there were over a hundred. Enclosing a birthday card, Wood sealed the box and gave it to Charley Saad, the club trainer, to wrap. With tender loving care, Saad put white paper and a thick red ribbon tied in a bow around it and left it in Sain's locker early on Sain's birthday, September 25. Sain fell apart when he opened it, and to this day chuckles at a Wood caper that took practically a whole season to engineer.

Sain once made the mistake of making Wood in charge of working out the pitchers in the first week of spring training.

“What he says goes,” Sain ordered.

As he started walking away, he heard Wood yell, “All right, gang. Do five wind sprints, five jumping jacks, and go in.”

Half a minute later Sain watched his whole pitching staff head happily for the locker room. He grinned and said, “Okay, Woody's the boss,” but he never made Woody the boss again.

Wood's wife, Sandy, a blue-eyed blonde who went through junior high and high school with him, calls him “Woody.” Devoted to her and their three children, Wendy, Derron and Christen, Wood is a straight-arrow guy in a swingers' paradise.

Except when he throws the knuckler. Though serious about the pitch that gave him a new baseball life, he grins when he discusses it. He also sometimes drives his own teammates mad by throwing it in batting practice. “I'd rather be behind Woody than in front of him when he throws that thing,” says Bill Melton, the White Sox third baseman who was the American League's home run king last year. “I can't get five good pieces of the ball in ten swings off him.”

The White Sox third baseman, who goes to the mound whenever Tanner holds a council of war there, marvels at Wood's imperturbability under any and all circumstances. “No matter what happens,” says Melton, “Woody never changes expression or shows annoyance during a ballgame. One day in Kansas City when Tanner came out of the dugout after he had walked the leadoff man on four pitches, Woody said, 'Don't worry, Skip. I've got everything under control.' He HAD everything under control, too. But not long after that when Oakland had collected 11 hits in four innings, Woody, in exactly the same tone and with exactly the same expression as that night in Kansas City, calmly told Tanner, 'Everything's working, Skip, but they're just hitting the hell out of it.' That time he came out.”

Oakland was one of the few clubs with a winning record over Wood last year. Ed Herrmann, who catches Wood more often than anyone else, says a club like the A's will

always give a knuckleball pitcher trouble. "Last year Woody could handle Reggie Jackson and Rick Monday, their big hitters," Herrmann said. "But they've got a lot of slap hitters who choke up and just punch the ball."

Herrmann, who caught Wilhelm and helped teach Tom Egan, the other regular White Sox catcher, to handle Wood, is one of the few receivers who don't mind knuckleball pitchers. "Woody's the toughest because his ball comes in hard and fast," Herrmann said. "Wilhelm's ball moved around more, but it floated and you could get set for it. I can usually tell which side of the plate Woody's pitch will come in, but there's no way you can judge the height. If he comes straight down, the ball will be over the middle. If his hand is out when he lets the ball go, it will be inside to a lefthanded hitter. If his hand is in, it will come inside to a righthander."

Herrmann smiled, then said, "I'm not giving away any state secrets. The only man in the park who can tell which way Woody releases the ball is the catcher, and even he won't know until he's handled Woody for years because the differences in his release of the ball are so slight. I can't tell from the batter's box and I'm not sure even Woody knows the difference."

"I don't," Wood says, "I have no idea of what any pitch of mine will do. All I ever want is to get it over the plate. I always try to throw it straight and if I turn my hand slightly one way or the other from time to time I'm not aware of it."

The first thing that manager Eddie Stanky told Wood when he reported to the White Sox in 1967 was: "You won't make this club as a starter or a short reliever. We got you just for long relief."

"Those were tough words from the manager your second day in a new camp," Wood said. "But the way I was then, Stanky had no choice. He knew my fastball wasn't fast enough and my breaking ball didn't break enough for the big leagues. All I had was control and the only thing that happens to a control pitcher who can't overpower or fool good hitters is that he'll get bombed. I needed another pitch to keep them guessing and with Wilhelm helping me, the knuckler was it."

By throwing the knuckler every day and virtually junking all his other pitches, Wood was soon the most consistent reliever in baseball. In 1968 he won the "Fireman-of-the-Year" award by appearing in an American League record 88 games, and he led the league in appearances in each of the two years that followed.

As a starter, he may now be on his way to pitching the White Sox to a pennant. If his knuckler stands up they've got a chance. If it doesn't they're just another ballclub.