



Years Later, Pappas Remains Center of Perfect Storm

By Paul Ladewski

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Exactly 40 years have passed since Milt Pappas pitched the game of his life, not that he can ever forget it.

Everyone from close friends to perfect strangers rarely mention his other 208 victories, two All-Star Game appearances and one blockbuster trade. They want to talk about about his no-hitter on Sept. 2, 1972 at Wrigley Field. More times than not, someone will say the words that the former Cubs pitcher will take to his grave . . .

“It should have been a perfect game.”

Indeed, the events that took place that overcast Saturday afternoon against the San Diego Padres are as complex as the man himself. Pappas was a fiery competitor on the field, an outspoken critic off it. In a span of two hours, hours minutes, he experienced a strange mix of emotions, the highest of highs and lowest of lows in a rather impressive if somewhat overlooked 17-year career.



Umpire Bruce Froemming and pitcher Milt Pappas are forever linked in baseball history.

The moment of truth came with two outs in the ninth inning, pinch-hitter Larry Stahl at the plate and Pappas within one strike of a rare perfect game. The right-hander threw three pitches that either were close enough to the black to be called strikes or far enough from it to be called balls depending on the viewpoint. When plate umpire Bruce Froemming chose the latter, the perfect game became the perfect storm. It remains the only such gem in major league history to be broken up by a base on balls in the ninth inning.

“To me, those last three pitches were close enough to be called strikes and constituted a perfect game,” the 73 year-old Pappas told the Chicago Baseball Museum. “Whether they were a tiny bit outside or right on the outside corner, history was being made.

“Unfortunately, Froemming didn't see it that way. Of course, he'll never admit to the fact that he blew it. He's just that kind of guy. Bruce Froemming is a very arrogant man. He sure is.”

In 15 major league seasons, Pappas had never taken a no-hitter into the ninth inning let alone a perfect game. Hours earlier, there was no hint that this time would be any different.

“As a matter of fact, I didn't feel real good when I warmed up,” recalled Pappas, his memory as impeccable as his control back then. “I knew it was a day that I would have to be a pitcher and not a thrower.”

Then again, at 33, Pappas had never been in a groove quite like this one. At the All-Star break, he owned a ordinary 6-6 record and 3.54 earned run average with above-average talent behind him, which prompted whispers that his career had reached the end of the line. Suddenly, without so much as a tweak in his mechanics, the veteran began a remarkable turnaround. He entered the contest on the wave of a four-game win streak and would close the season with 11 victories and a 1.86 earned run average in his final 11 starts.

“Everything just went right,” explained Pappas, who went on to post a career-high 17 victories that season. “It was one of those unique experiences that you had once in a lifetime.”

What's more, the last-place Padres comprised one of the weakest offenses in the major leagues. They took a .227 team batting average into the game, which ranked 11th in a 12-team league. His team on the last leg of a forgettable 10-game road trip, manager Don Zimmer penciled seven starters with sub-.263 marks on his line-up card.

Pappas retired the first nine batters in order to start the game. “Everything started to click from the first inning on – fastball and slider,” he said. “And that's what (catcher) Randy (Hundley) stayed with the whole game.” He also had a bit of good fortune as well. Third baseman Dave Roberts, second baseman Derrel Thomas and catcher Fred Kendall hit line drives that found their ways into gloves.

When Pappas retired the visitors the second time around – one fair ball was hit out of the infield – there was a hint of something special in the late summer air. In the seventh inning, shortstop Enzo Hernandez, Roberts and left fielder Leron Lee went down in order. Ditto first baseman Nate Colbert, center fielder Cito Gaston and Thomas in the eighth inning. By that time, his teammates had given him a comfortable 4-0 lead.

The Padres had been down this lonely road before. Two months earlier, in the first game of a Fourth of July doubleheader, New York Mets pitcher Tom Seaver took a no-hitter into the ninth inning before Lee singled with one out in the ninth inning.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, here comes the big ninth,” broadcaster Jack Brickhouse told the WGN television audience that was about to grow in numbers. “Now here's John Jeter . . . Jack Brickhouse back with you once again . . . Cubs ahead, 8 to nothing. And there's a swing for strike one, as Milt Pappas trying not only for a no-hitter, he's trying for a perfect game. He has faced 24 men in eight innings. Jeter, who beat the Cubs out of ballgame on a homer at San Diego recently, is in the batter's box – John Jeter . . . That's low, ball one, strike one.”

“(Billy) Williams, (Bill) North, (Jose) Cardenal in left, center and right. (Ron) Santo, (Don) Kessinger, (Carmen) Fanzone, (Jim) Hickman, the infield from third to first. The battery: Pappas and Hundley. Here we go . . . The plate umpire is Froemming. . . There's a well-hit ball, deep to left-center, back goes North . . . He slips and falls! However, it's Billy Williams coming from nowhere to save that play! Ohhhhh, brother! Billy North, moving over, slipped and fell and Billy Williams caught the ball! Look at this . . .! It's to left-center . . . Now, as he starts to circle for the ball, he slips and falls and here comes Billy Williams running out from under his cap to make this catch! Ohhhhh, brother! Hooooo, what a play! Man alive! Here's the catcher Kendall, and bless our cameramen and keep them well!”

Staccato chants of “We want an out!” from the 11,144 fans on hand could be heard in the background.

“One away. There's a drive to left field . . .! It is a foul ball beyond the bullpen, a very hard-hit ball, about as hard a hit ball as we've seen today! He really laid into that one. Kendall can hit the long ball. He has six home runs this year. He was at bat in the sixth inning, and he hit a groundball to Santo, a routine grounder, but Santo threw off the mark and Hickman made a very nice save.

“So, strike one, one away, ninth inning . . . There's a ground ball right at Kessinger . . . Here's the throw – No. 2! One more to go!”

“Let's see who's going to bat now for San Diego . . . Larry Stahl, who pinch-hit yesterday and who can hit a long ball is batting for (pitcher Al) Severinson – Larry Stahl. Two out in the ninth. Larry Stahl has five home runs and 17 runs batted in with a .232 batting average . . . Swing and a miss – strike one.

“Wrigley Field, Chicago, Sept. 2 , 1972 . . . Milt Pappas, two outs in the bottom of the ninth, heading for a perfect game . . . Cubs ahead, 8 to nothing. Larry Stahl, pinch-hitting for the pitcher, strike one the count . . . That is a ball, off the mark outside. Ball one, strike one.”

“And of course, if he gets this no-hitter . . . (broadcasters) Jim West and Lou Boudreau will be right down there to grab him for us. Ball one, strike one, two out in the ninth . . . Pappas fires away – swing and miss! Ball one, strike two!”

“Outfield straight away, fairly deep. Right side of the infield deep. Kessinger playing a step or two over toward second from his normal shortstop position. Ball one, strike two . . . Here it comes – outside! Ball two, strike two.”

Muffled groans could be heard around the ballpark.

“Two and two to Larry Stahl. Everybody here is either standing up or on the edge of his or her seat at Wrigley Field. Here it comes . . . It's a ball! Ball three, strike two . . . Low and away that time.”

The groans grew louder.

“Now here comes one of the most fateful pitches of the year . . . Ball three, strike two, two out, perfect game on the line. No-hitter on the line. Watch it . . . It's a ball! And Pappas is enraged! Ball four – there goes the perfect game! The no-hitter is still intact! Milt Pappas, doing a burn . . .!”

The masterpiece was flawed forever. Froemming had chiseled the legs off the Venus de Milo, as far as Pappas was concerned.

“Yeah, no kidding,” he said, no small trace of disgust in his voice.

“Milt Pappas got hurt in a way, because I think the pitch was a strike especially to be that close,” said second baseman Glenn Beckert, who was scratched from the line-up because of an injury and watched the game in the dugout. “The ball was on the corner half and half. It was crucial for Milt to get a perfect game, and (Froemming) called it ball four. I couldn't believe it. None of the players who watched it could believe it.”

Least of all Pappas, who immediately kicked at the dirt and swore a blue streak. He finished in English then continued in Greek. Finally, Froemming took off his mask and moved halfway to the mound to confront him. On another day, in another situation, the man in blue probably would have ejected him from the game.

Pappas also was mystified that Stahl didn't offer at any of the last three pitches. “They were too close for him to take, to be honest with you,” he said. “That's why I wish he would have given me some kind of a sign. I don't understand what he was thinking at that particular time.” Stahl also coaxed a walk as a pinch-hitter in Seaver's one-hitter earlier in the season.

“I was known as a guy who liked to swing the bat,” Stahl said from his Belleville, Ill., residence. “I took those pitches because of one reason – they were outside the strike zone, especially the last one. Pappas had great stuff that day, but when he says they were strikes, he's thinking with his heart and not his head. I give credit to Froemming – he was a good umpire whose strike zone was the same from the first inning to the last one.”

“Man on base, two out. Gary Jestadt, pinch-hitting. . . Milt Pappas going for a no-hitter . . . In the dirt – ball one! The outfield pulled over to the left. They'll play fairly deep for Jestadt, a former Cub . . . Kessinger playing a very deep shortstop, Fanzone at second inching over toward second base, ready to take a throw from Don or Ron on a ball hit to the left side of the infield . . . Cubs ahead, 8 to nothing. That is a strike across the inside corner! Ball one, strike one.

“The last perfect game was by Catfish Hunter of the A's against the Minnesota Twins, May 8, 1968 . . . There's a high fly ball, short right . . .! Should be caught . . .! Fanzone's out there on the grass . . .! He has it! It's a no-hitter for Pappas, a no-hitter for Milt Pappas! Ohhh, brother . . .!”

Hundley and Santo were the first to mob the man of the moment on the field. Moments later, Pappas was the toast of the clubhouse. “We would stick around and have a couple

beers while the traffic died down and tell each other, 'You were great today' or 'You were horsebleep' or whatever," Beckert said. "We told Milt that he was great that day."

The no-hitter was the second of the season by a Cubs pitcher and the seventh since the turn of the century. In the second game of the season, rookie Burt Hooton blanked the Philadelphia Phillies at Wrigley Field.

"I was very gratified to have pitched a no-hitter after I cooled down," said Pappas, who struck out six batters in the game. "It was something very nice that had never happened before in my career, so I was pleased as punch. I don't remember one even in Little League or high school when I grew up in Detroit."

Yet it wasn't long before reality set in permanently. Pappas had lost a chance to become only the eighth major leaguer to pitch a perfect game, a thought that haunted him ever since.

"When everything settled down and I got home that night in the quiet of my house, I finally realized that this guy blew a perfect game," Pappas said. "That's when I really got upset."

"I thought the umpire might not like Milt or something from previous games," Beckert surmised. "Or maybe the umpire just made an off call or whatever. That happens."

Only three times was Froemming behind the plate with Pappas on the mound. The veteran was known for precise control, and as a result, he was afforded the benefit of the doubt oftentimes. (In 1972, he averaged 1.3 walks per nine innings, the lowest rate among National League pitchers.) Based on a small sample size, however, Froemming didn't allow reputation to cloud his judgment. Pappas issued one walk per 12.4 batters when he called balls and strikes compared to one for every 15.4 overall.

Rather, Pappas believed the fatal decision to be the work of an inexperienced umpire who allowed his ego to get in the way of baseball history.

"Our relationship was fine as far as I knew," Pappas said. "It was only his second year in major league baseball. He was not a rookie but close to it. I never had any run-ins with him. Bruce Froemming is a very arrogant man."

Stahl and Pappas haven't crossed paths since then. "If it happens, I'll make sure to bring my guns with me," joked Stahl, a career .232 hitter in 10 seasons.

Pappas and Froemming have spoken twice since then. The first was at a banquet decades ago. More recently, they appeared on the Jonathan Brandmeier radio show, on which Pappas wasted no time to vent again.

"I went at him pretty good," Pappas admitted. "I just spoke my mind that, in a situation such as that one, when you're winning 8-0 and playing at home, you know, that pitch should have been called a strike."

“You look at Don Larsen's perfect game (in the 1956 World Series) and see the last pitch . . . I mean, good god, that ball almost hit Dale Mitchell in the chin. But the umpire knew that history was being made. Unfortunately, Froemming didn't see it that way. Years later, I found out that even said to some people, 'I didn't know that it was a perfect game.' Well, how stupid is that?”

“On the Brandmeier Show, he said, 'What do you want me to do – change my way of thinking as an umpire?' I said, 'No, call that thing a strike because both of us could say we were involved in a perfect game.' He acted like I insulted him that he didn't do his job as an umpire. Well, that's a bunch of baloney, because they blow calls every day whether it's on the field or balls and strikes.”

Froemming has steadfastly refused to discuss the sequence whether with fans and media alike. In his current role as Major League Baseball Special Assistant to the Vice President on Umpiring, he is unlikely to do so any time soon.

Whether any of the three pitches in question actually were strikes will be open to open to debate forever. In anticipation of a post-game celebration on the field, the WGN producers opted to have the cameras focus on the field from behind home plate and not the center field bleachers, from where pitch location can be tracked more far accurately.

Because Pappas was largely ignored in the Hall of Fame process, a perfect game meant more to his resume than most others.

He totaled as many career victories as Don Drysdale and more than Sandy Koufax, two of his contemporaries. His .560 win percentage (209-164 record) was better than that of Drysdale, Jim Bunning, Ferguson Jenkins, Gaylord Perry and Don Sutton. Even so, while the rest were deemed to be worthy of Hall of Fame honors, he appeared on the ballot only one time.

Pappas wasn't in the right place at the right time, it seemed. Until late in his career, he played in small markets and out of the limelight. After the 1965 season, the Baltimore Orioles sent him to the Cincinnati Reds in return for outfielder Frank Robinson, one of the most controversial trades in major league history. While Robinson led the Orioles to their first World Series championship the next season, Pappas never would have the chance to play in the signature event.

Yet for as much as Pappas accomplished in three decades, he never won more than 17 games in any season. Only in 1972 did he receive votes in the annual Cy Young Award election. Something as rare as a perfect game might have prompted some voters to take a closer look at his accomplishments.

Said Pappas, “I don't know that the perfect game would have changed their minds, to be honest with you. Whether or not that made a difference, it shouldn't have. I won more games and had a better record than Don Drysdale, and he's in the Hall of Fame. If that's the record they looked at as the criteria, then I obviously should be there.”

It didn't help Pappas to be out of baseball at 34 years of age, either. In addition to his outspoken ways, he was active union member, which some considered to be two strikes against him. After the 1973 season, the Cubs decided not to resign him. Only the Padres expressed in him, and then at only at two-thirds of his previous salary, the minimum requirement.

“No doubt it would have helped me to stay in the game, but nobody gave me the opportunity except the Padres, and I wasn't about to go there without a bonus of some sort,” Pappas said. “I told them, 'Yeah, I wouldn't mind to come out there, but I have to make more the salary I made (with the Cubs). I have to fly my family back and forth, rent a house, rent a car . . . I'm a free agent. Make it my worthwhile to come out there.' They were the only team that contacted me.”

As for Pappas the coach, he said, “Not if I had to go to the minors. They didn't pay squat down there. It's a little different today. For the money and the traveling and to be in the minors and try to work my way up to the majors, no, I wanted no part of that.”

So while Drysdale spent three decades as a radio and television broadcaster, Pappas worked for a wine and beer distributorship. Later he became a building supplies salesman, a position that he holds today.

“Moreso than our records, the reason that Drysdale is in the Hall of Fame and I'm not is because he became an announcer,” Pappas said. “He was in the eyes of the people who voted for the Hall of Fame every day, and I wasn't. That had a tremendous bearing on what happened.”

After the mandatory five-year wait, Pappas became eligible to have his name on the Hall of Fame ballot but failed to make the cut. It wasn't long before he went Froemming on the selection committee.

“I really had to criticize the process,” Pappas said. “I called (local BBWAA chairman) Jerry Holtzman and said, 'You know, how does this Hall of Fame thing work?' He said, 'Well, it goes to a committee of five or six newspapermen. They take the names that they think have the best chance to be in the Hall of Fame.' They finally relented and put me on the ballot. Everybody was upset with me because I did criticize the way it was handled.”

In 1979, Pappas made his first and last appearance on the ballot. He was named on five of the 432 ballots.

“I didn't get the required 5 percent to stay on the ballot after that,” Pappas said. “So because of their stupidity and my criticism, I never got the chance to be in the Hall of Fame. Yeah, I was upset. It was not a pleasant situation with the Hall of Fame. It was a shame that I had to criticize the people who put their names on the ballots, but it was ridiculous.”

Pappas may be disappointed about the final chapter of his career, but he won't take his frustrations out on the game. The south suburban Beecher resident is a regular at the

Cubs Convention, and he is a frequent visitor to the ballparks at both sides of town each season. His wife Judi is the Dean of Students at Crete-Monee High School.

Wherever the ex-Cub goes in baseball circles, the talk is pretty much the same as it has been for decades.

“When I’m introduced to people, it’s amazing that I won 209 games and the only game they remember is that one, you know?” Pappas said. “Nobody talks about the previous 208 games that I won, so it’s quite unique that they still remember it. I’m tickled to death that they still remember me. Forty years later, it’s a tremendous honor still to be viewed as a former ballplayer who people remember.

“You know, people can view things differently, but that’s all right. I got the no-hitter, and the controversy still lives.”