

Mark Smith, Halifax, NS



By Bob Otto

He blew into Southern California from Canada like a bone-chilling, north wind. He had powerful biting pitches and the God-given speed that only the truly great fastpitch softball pitchers possess. Much like Nolan Ryan, when Mark Smith was "on", no one touched him, including the great hitters of Southern California and the Western Softball Congress ISC travel league.

Along with his blazing speed was a touch of youthful wildness. Wildness that froze hitters in the box. Wildness from a 80-plus mph under-the-chin rise ball that made them creep back to the outer reaches of the batters box - for safety's sake.

There were two possibilities when facing Smith: It was damn near impossible to hit him, but quite possible to get hit by him. Hitters feared the possible and came to accept and respect the impossible.

When Smith arrived in California to pitch for the Camarillo Kings in 1981, no one expected the sudden transfer of power that was about to take place in the Western Softball Congress. Sure the Kings looked good on paper. Sure they had

signed this 21-year-old fire-baller from Canada. But California had fire-ballers up and down the coast.

This after all was the WSC, one of North America's most powerful men's fastpitch leagues. The Kings appeared to be competitive, but the establishment, the Long Beach Nitehawks, Lakewood Jets, Lancaster Chameleons and Vista Bombers were still expected to rule - that is until Mr. Smith arrived.

And Smith was tough. Downright menacing. Built more along the lines of a linebacker at six-foot, 225 pounds, he was an intimidating presence say some of the WSC's top hitters.

"You couldn't dig in against him," said Greg Sepulveda who played shortstop for the Lakewood Jets and Lancaster Chameleons. "He was wild back then and very intimidating. I got hit by him a couple of times. He had that old pitchers mentality, 'if you dig in against me, you're fair game.' "

And the fairest of the game was the California slappers. Running up in the box on Smith often got the slappers a closer-than-wanted look at his inside rise ball.

"Terry Canale (Long Beach Nitehawks) was the first slapper I faced," said Smith. "He wasn't a very big guy and in his case I used intimidation. I threw pretty hard, so I threw rise balls up and in to brush him off the plate. Once I got it into his head that if he committed early he might get hit with a pitch, it threw off his timing and I was able to exploit that." Translation: Instill fear. Jerry Hoffman, who played 12 years in the WSC agreed.

"The hardest part? Overcoming fear," said Hoffman with a laugh. "He threw so hard that you didn't dare dig in - Mark was very intimidating. I remember a pitch he threw to Terry Canale. It was a rise ball in. Terry ducked and it went right over his head. The ball hit the backstop and bounced all the way to the outfield.

"In the WSC you faced great pitching day in and day out - Paul Magan, Kevin Herlihy, Steve Schultz," said Hoffman. "Game in and game out, Smith was one of the hardest throwers we faced. You either learned to adjust to his type of pitching or it would destroy your confidence and make players run back to the A and B leagues."

"I saw him throw for the first time at Joe Rogers field in Long Beach," said former ISC Executive Director, Milt Stark. "He threw awfully, awfully hard. I've never seen anyone throw any harder. But he had very little control. He certainly went on to prove himself."

Smith certainly did, leading the Camarillo Kings to two ISC World Tournament titles in 1981 and 1982. It was a brief stay in the spotlight for Smith and the Kings, but during that time he put up some impressive numbers. "Overall in '81 I was 34-5 and in '82 I was around 40-6," said Smith. "I'm told that I went 19-0 in the World Tournament before losing, but I'm not sure."