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James Hoyt Wilhelm was a major league pitcher, an All Star several times over, a World Series winner, and a Hall of Famer. That is certainly enough to get the respect of anyone at any age. But a deeper dive into the facts of his life shows he embodies the values, lessons, and hopes our young should aspire to.

Hoyt Wilhelm was not blessed with a 100-mile-an-hour fastball or the kind of stuff that would attract scouts from across the country. He learned how to throw a knuckleball and perfected the strange pitch to the point where he earned a spot with the Mooresville minor league team.

In fact his baseball life stalled before the majors were even a factor. He was released from Class D ball. He was not good enough to play at the lowest rung of the professional ladder. His manager told him to stop throwing the knuckleball and that his future in baseball was over.

Instead of quitting, he persevered. Playing in several different organizations and bouncing around the country, Hoyt finally made the major leagues in 1952 as a member of the New York Giants. He was 29. That is the age most people retire from baseball. He was probably only going to last a year or two. While with the Giants, manager Leo Durocher sent him to the bullpen. At the time, the bullpen was a demotion. It was where pitchers who were not good enough to start toiled. With very few exceptions, relief pitchers were anonymous and easily disposable. Hoyt did not treat it like a demotion. He made it an opportunity. Despite not starting a game all season, Hoyt led the National League in earned run average and his 15 wins against three defeats was the best winning percentage in the league.

In 1953, he was selected to the All Star Game. By 1954, he was pitching in the World Series, using that knuckle ball he was told to abandon, and helped form a dominant relief corps that pulled off one of the greatest upsets in World Series history. The Giants swept the mighty Cleveland Indians, who had won a then-record 111 games that season. Wilhelm earned the save in Game 3 and pitched in the Game 4 clincher.

But, as expected, as he reached his mid-thirties, his career began to wind down and by 1958, Hoyt had bounced around between the Giants, Cardinals, and Indians. But at age 36, he found new life in Baltimore. There he pitched as a starter and a reliever, threw a no hitter against the invincible Yankees, led the league in ERA, and made his second All Star team.

Between ages 36 and 47, Hoyt Wilhelm not only used the knuckleball to become the most durable reliever in the game, but rewrote the record book, becoming a pioneer in the process. He was a relief pitcher superstar while pitching in the 1960s and 1970s for the Orioles, White Sox, Cubs, Braves, Angels and Dodgers. He became the first pitcher to appear in 1,000 games and set records in relief innings and victories out of the bullpen. And while the careers of most pitchers are over in their late 20s, Hoyt made the All Star team at age 47 in 1970, earning the All Star honor in three different decades.

In 1985, after eight tries, Hoyt was elected to the Hall of Fame. Many resisted voting for him because no one who was primarily a reliever had ever been elected to Cooperstown. But as with

everything in his life, he persevered, paving the way for Bruce Sutter, Rollie Fingers, Goose Gossage, Dennis Eckersely, and eventually Mariano Rivera in election. In his acceptance speech, he mentioned his high school coaches and his time playing in Cornelius.

Imagine a child who visits this facility looking up these facts about Hoyt Wilhelm. They would learn that he showed strength and courage in a much more tangible way than on the baseball field. Hoyt left his minor league team to fight in World War II. He saw active duty, fighting at the Battle of the Bulge, where he was wounded. He played his entire big league career with a piece of shrapnel in his back. It takes quite a life to have a World Series ring and a Hall of Fame plaque, but with neither of those as one's greatest accomplishment; however, that is the case for this Purple Heart awardee.

After learning about this great life and answering "Who is Hoyt Wilhelm?" another question could be asked: "Where did a man like Hoyt Wilhelm start his journey?" The answer is that his baseball life began right here behind Cornelius Elementary School, then called Cornelius High School, on the very field where the kids of Cornelius are now playing. Chances are these children will not make it to the majors or play in the World Series or be elected to the Hall of Fame or earn the Purple Heart. But they CAN learn the lessons of hard work, dealing with adversity, silencing the naysayers with accomplishments, making the most of opportunities, and fighting for a greater good. These traits that Hoyt Wilhelm embodied would be an inspiration on the field where he played.

The game of baseball exists in the past, present, and future simultaneously. We love the game today while honoring what has happened before and anticipating what great events haven't happened yet. Saluting the past of Hoyt Wilhelm for today's kids to aspire to be great adults is the perfect way to carry on his memory.

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