

Hall of Fame

It all comes down to fundamentals

Mike Raczka wouldn't quit and played his way to the major leagues

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SPORTS WRITER

To stare down a Mike Raczka fastball his freshman year with the Knights was a little like playing a game of Russian roulette. The lanky lefty could throw fast. He had great form, but nobody knew where his pitch would cross the plate...not even Raczka.

When it comes to Major League hurlers, Raczka was an unlikely prospect.

Sometimes, his cool, silky attitude frustrated his high school coaches. The word "potential" seemed to be peppered throughout conversations. His college coach actually cut him from the team in his freshman year, and he came close to doing it again the following year.

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It took what it took, but that was the spark Raczka needed. He returned to his dorm with tears in his eyes until that old fierce resolve came back.

"It's about not quitting but doing it the right way," he said. "I've seen kids want to just pack things in because they don't feel like they're getting a fair shake. There are a lot of unfair shakes in life. You know? You've just got to reach in and believe in what you're doing."

Raczka didn't set out to make the major leagues. He didn't set out to dominate a storied college franchise. He didn't even set out to be a Blue Knight pitcher. Raczka was just one of the gang growing up on Foley Street in the 1970s. He'd roam the streets with his glove dangling from his handlebars, looking for someone to play against.

He'd play pick-up games and rivalries in whatever sport was being offered. In the winter, he'd play hockey. In the summer, he'd play hit-the-bat or invent games with a tennis ball. When the sun was shining, Raczka was outdoors.

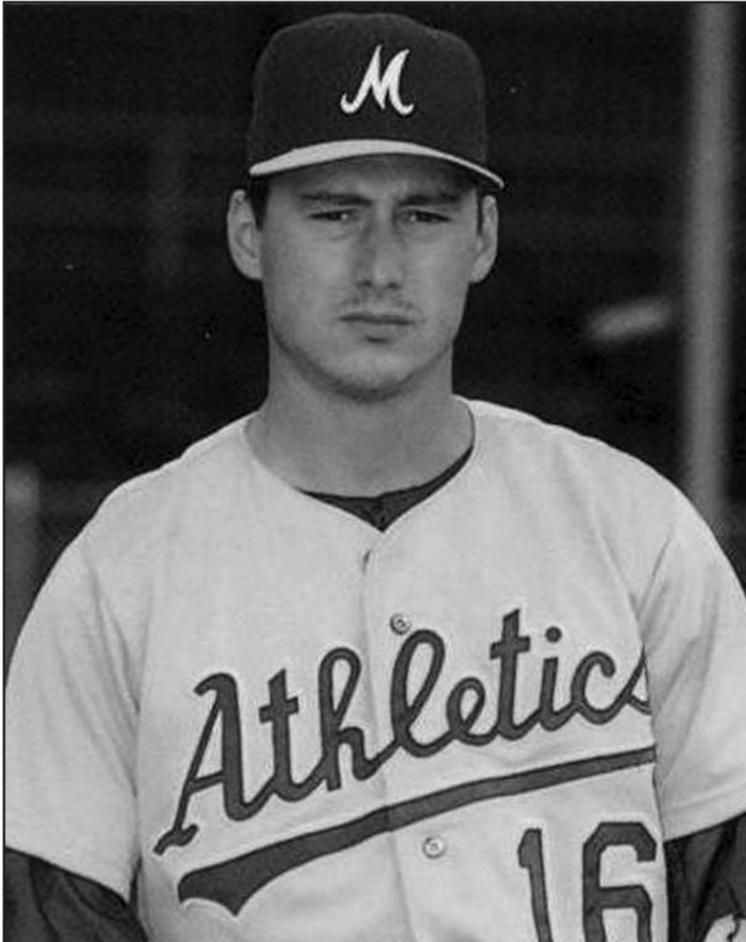
"There were kids everywhere. It wasn't like it is today," he said. "We were always playing something, whether it was baseball, basketball, or football...I wasn't always the best. I was in the middle, playing against everybody else. I was nothing spectacular, but we didn't think about it like they do now. Everybody just wanted to play."

Raczka threw himself into everything from midget football to Little League, and coaches hammered him about fundamentals.

Raczka still carries an old, tattered book that his father gave him that's entitled, *The Basic Fundamentals and Mechanics of Successful Pitching*, written by Bob Shaw. It was recommended by a former Blue Knight pitcher Bill Dickman, and it has become a sort of Bible for Raczka. He still uses it when he teaches young pitchers, and he still studies the photographs of hall of fame pitchers.

Raczka believes that fundamentals are critical, and it was one reason why high school coaches suffered through his junior varsity years despite his lack of control.

"I think that Mike Raczka was a major league pitcher, and I don't throw that around lightly," said Fontana. "He could pick guys off. He had that smooth delivery with his arm up. He had a good leg kick.



FROM 1992 ROOKIE CARD

Mike Raczka fought his way onto the Oakland A's roster.

He could spot the ball. He went from being so wild to being able to put the ball where he wanted. It's amazing how good he became."

After two years of struggling through junior varsity starts, Raczka got his chance on the varsity mound in 1980. He made the most of it. Raczka went 9-1, and The Knights (22-3) reached the semifinals. That's when Raczka met University of New Haven (UNH) coach Frank "Porky" Vieira. The storied coach approached him after a postseason win and asked if he wanted to play for UNH. Raczka leapt at the chance.

"He said, 'OK. Then you've got a full ride.' Then, he turned and walked away," Raczka remembered. "It had never even crossed my mind before that."

College turned out to be a culture shock for Raczka. With no freshman or JV team, coaches didn't have the luxury of waiting for him to get up to speed. After a number of slow starts, Vieira kicked the young Raczka off his team in a flurry of obscenities.

"The fact that he came back says a lot," said Vieira. "I think that's what it's all about. Maybe that was the answer for him to become a major league pitcher. He just came on and came on. He wasn't great the first few years with me. He was sort of awed by the scene. We had great teams then, but he came on by the time he was a junior or a senior, and he was the best that I ever coached."

Raczka returned to practice the next day. He watched teammates practicing in uniforms as he worked out on the sidelines in practice gear. Captains ran him past fatigue. Coaches criticized his every move, but Raczka wouldn't quit. After a few days, Vieira offered him a second chance.

"I told him that I wanted to play for him," said Raczka. "It was an honor to play for the University of New Haven, for Coach V. It was a mind set, and I didn't learn it until I was a sophomore. After the first

couple of games, I finally got it. Then, I went off on a tear."

Raczka wasn't satisfied with making the team, he set out to be the best. He is still ranked in the top 10 of six pitching categories at UNH and still holds the school record for strikeouts (312). He's ranked second in single season strikeouts (145), third in innings pitched (235.1), sixth in appearances (55) and victories (29), and eighth in single season innings pitched (115.1).

Raczka was named as the school's male athlete of the year in 1984. He was inducted into the UNH Hall of Fame in 1998, and he was selected to the 'All-Porky' team as one of the best players in his coach's 45 years on the diamond.

"Mike Raczka was the best left hander in the history of University of New Haven baseball—without a question. He's the greatest left handed pitcher that I've ever coached," said Vieira. "Mike Raczka struck out 17 against Quinnipiac to take us to the World Series. To me, he was the closest thing to Sandy Koufax that I've ever seen. His mechanics were outstanding."

His success drew the attention of major league scouts, and Raczka was drafted in the 11th round by the Toronto Blue Jays after as a junior, but returned to college. He was drafted by the Orioles the following year and was signed to a minor league contract.

Over the next eight seasons, Raczka battled his way through the minor leagues. Once again, he refused to give up. He played the political game, listened to his coaches, and threw strikeouts.

"They dump you in a city with a bunch of guys you've never met before, and you have to figure it all out. It's life in the fast lane," said Raczka. "There were times when I was on a roll, and guys were saying things like, 'I taught him that,' or 'I showed him that curveball.' Then, you'd get on a bad streak, and they'd say they didn't want anything to do with you. It's tough."

Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Southington High School

- Played varsity baseball and football.
- Went 9-1 as a senior pitcher (1980).
- All Conference in baseball (1980).
- Inducted into the Southington Baseball Hall of Fame (1991).

University of New Haven

- All-American (1982, 1984).
- All Region (1982, 1983, 1984).
- All conference (1984).
- Captain (1984).
- UNH Male Athlete of the Year (1984).
- Inaugurated into the UNH Hall of Fame (1998).
- Holds school record for strikeouts (312).
- Ranked 2nd in single season strikeouts (145).
- Ranked 3rd in innings pitched (235.1).
- Ranked 6th in appearances (55).
- Ranked 6th in career victories (29).
- Ranked 8th in single season innings pitched (115.1).

PITCHING STATISTICS

Year	G	IP	W	L	ShO	H	R	ER	BB	SO	ERA
1981	7	12	0	0	0	12	8	6	6	14	4.50
1982	17	102.3	9	3	2	80	40	27	28	63	2.37
1983	17	95.7	9	3	2	84	34	31	35	90	2.92
1984	14	115.1	11	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	145	NA
Career	55	325.3	29	6	4	176	82	64	69	312	2.74

Professional Baseball (MLB)

- Drafted by the Baltimore Orioles in 1984.
- Debuted on Aug. 15 1992 with the Oakland A's.
- Final game was Sept. 23, 1992

MINOR LEAGUE PITCHING STATISTICS

Year	Team/Level	W	L	ERA	G	SV	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO
1984	Bal-Min A	1	5	8.1	8	0	36.2	44	35	33	35	36
1985	Bal-Min A	3	2	3.32	35	3	97.2	101	55	36	48	93
1986	Bal-Min AA	8	7	5.92	32	1	155	170	114	102	92	107
1987	Bal-Min AAA,AA	6	11	7.19	35	0	112.2	145	96	90	62	86
1988	Bal-Min AAA,AA	1	5	5.45	47	10	66	74	46	40	34	51
1989	Bal-Min AAA	1	6	5.13	44	2	66.2	75	47	38	31	50
1990	Oak-SDP-Min AAA7	5	4.28	46	2	67.1	59	37	32	44	61	
1992	Oak-Min AAA,A+	1	2	4.03	37	1	58	51	31	26	27	31
1993	Oak-Min AAA	2	1	5.37	55	0	60.1	65	39	36	30	40
1994	Bos-Min AA,AAA	4	2	2.9	58	0	68.1	53	27	22	30	39
1995	STL-Min AAA	5	3	3.86	55	1	49	49	23	21	20	43

MAJOR LEAGUE PITCHING STATISTICS

Year	Team	W	L	ERA	G	SV	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO
1992	Oakland A's	0	0	8.53	8	0	6.1	8	7	6	5	2
Career	- 1 season	0	0	8.53	8	0	6.1	8	7	6	5	2

In 1992, he finally got his chance at the big leagues. Bob Boone called him into his office in Tacoma, and told him to pack his bags for Oakland. On Aug. 15, 1992, Raczka stepped onto the field against the Angels with a 5-0 deficit in the seventh inning. He faced four batters in a scoreless inning to spark a two-inning come-from-behind rally for the win.

"It's very hard to describe that feeling. You walk out of the dugout, and you look up to all these cheers going up in the stadium," he said. "Around you there's all these guys just going about their business. It's a business up there. They don't fool around."

Raczka's time in the majors was brief, but memorable. He remembers walking into the locker room to see his name posted above a locker. He remembers his family's faces as they watched him face Mel Hall and Matt Nokes at Yankee Stadium. He remembers having to warm up on the field in Oakland after a teammate's injury and hearing the crowd boo and hiss because of the delay.

Raczka was offered another chance at a AAA contract the following year. His pregnant wife supported him. His friends supported him, but Raczka stepped away from the game with no regrets.

"I had my daughter. She was pregnant with the twins at the time. We had just bought a house on Carter Lane," he said. "It was just time to put it down. I made that decision. I had kids to be a father. I didn't want that kind of life for them. The decision wasn't hard. It was hard the following spring during spring training."

For members of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee, Raczka was an easy choice.

"It's truly an honor to be mentioned with some of the people that are in there or are going to be in there," he said. "It's just amazing that I can be mentioned in the same breath with them. A lot of those people helped me in my career and in my life."

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, he will be inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame.