

Baltimore's Olson has big-time fastball

OLSON from Page 10

On the contrary. He was a bully -- and when he let loose his overpowering fastball, he'd grunt. It was enough to make a 125-pound second baseman throw up on the on-deck circle.

I know the feeling; I was a 125-pound infielder with a batting average not much higher than that when I faced the brute in 1985. Olson was a junior in high school, I was a senior playing for Columbus. Against Olson, I felt like a sixth-grader.

But I brought the bully to his knees. Well, maybe not, but I know I angered him because I heard the expletives the boy-man grumbled that day at Columbus.

You see, Olson and his Northwest buddies were issuing Columbus another sound whipping in a Legion baseball double-header in front of

about 23 bored fans in the sweltering heat.

Olson carried a no-hitter into the sixth inning of the seven-inning second game. Northwest had an eight-run lead. Due up were Columbus' seventh, eighth and ninth hitters. I hit eighth, so I got to watch Olson walk the first batter.

Now in that situation, most hitters would go up to the plate thinking "get a hit" or maybe "avoid hitting a double-play ball." I was thinking "survival." I liked the summer months, I liked beer, I liked girls. I didn't like the thought of a fastball lodged in my temple.

I looked at Olson's first two pitches and wondered why in the hell anyone would even think about facing a Nolan Ryan heater. You could hear Olson's pitches coming. First you'd hear his sickening grunt, then a

whiz, then the pop of the catcher's mitt.

I'm getting kind of ill just reflecting on it...

Anyway, for some reason, on Olson's third pitch, I swung -- I still don't know why. It was a neck-high fastball out over the plate and I lined it up the middle. Clean single. Bye-bye no hitter, hello euphoria.

The crowd didn't go wild. Somebody in the stands may have raised their eyebrows, but probably not. In the dugout, a few of my teammates were laughing.

Meanwhile, Olson was going wild, but he didn't keep it to himself. He was visibly disgusted -- he slammed his glove to his thigh. It was music to my ears.


I got tagged out in a run-down about two pitches later. Considering my state of mind after "The Hit," that's not surprising. Neither is the dirty look my manager shot me when I returned to the dugout. It didn't matter.

The significance of "The Hit" wasn't diminished by the fact that the next hitter -- whose talent as a hitter rivaled mine but who weighed 125 pounds more -- doubled to left field.


Nothing mattered. I had broken up a no-hitter against a man I feared more than my dad's tirade after I violated curfew.

And as Olson continues to strike out the major league's best hitters, I'll just grin.


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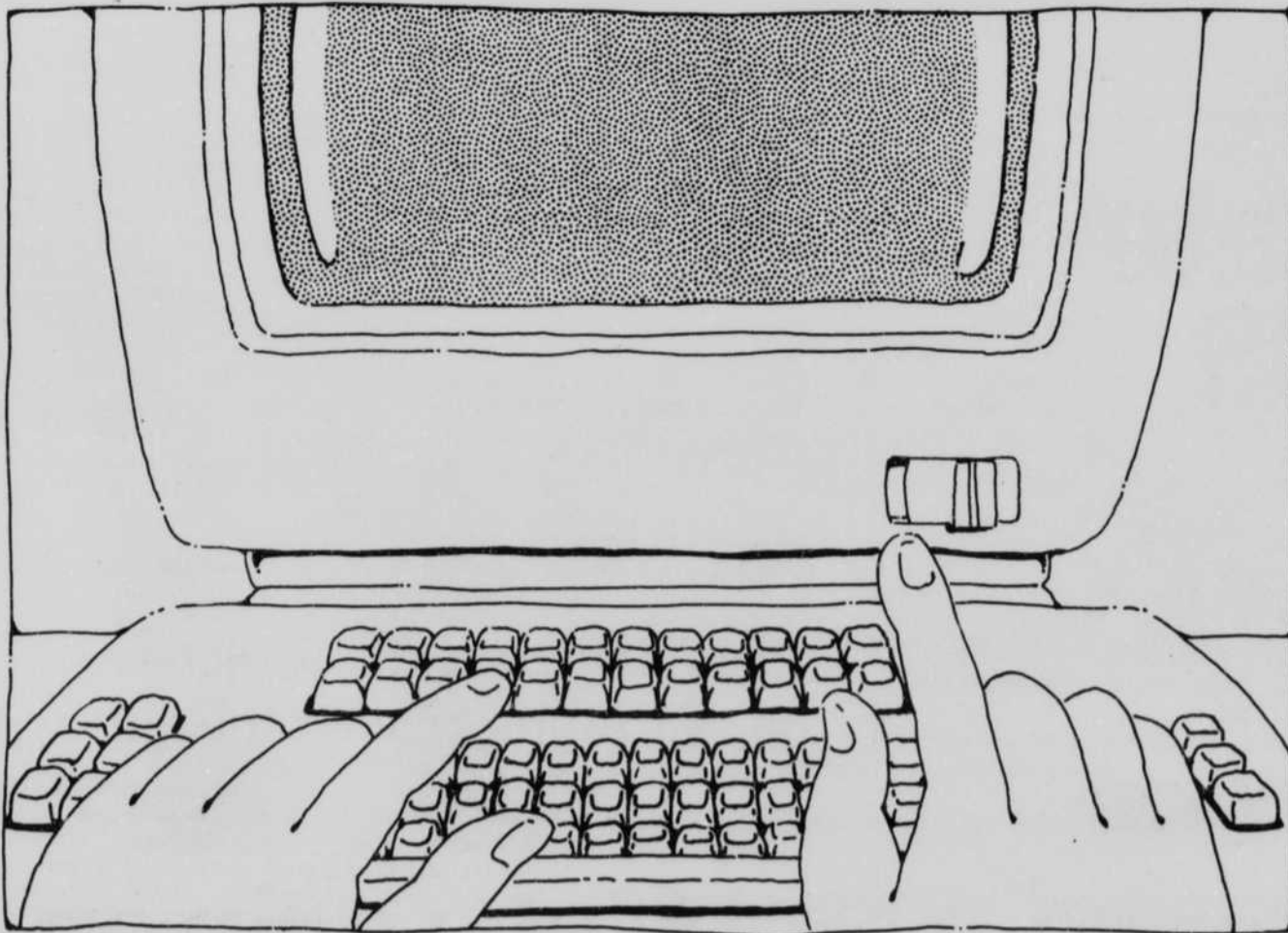
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