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What A Career! John Paciorek Was Perfect

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Each spring, John Paciorek remembers.

He remembers a sweltering autumn day in 1963. He remembers a Colt Stadium crowd in Houston that cheered his every move, both at the plate and in the field. And he remembers his performance, one that might never be matched.

That day, John Paciorek, 18, made baseball history.

On Sept. 29, 1963, in the final game of the season, Paciorek - in his major-league debut - stroked three singles, drove in three runs and scored four times for the Houston Colt .45s. He also walked twice, made two running catches, and showed Manager Harry Craft - whose club finished ninth in the National League - there was reason for optimism in 1964.

In all, Paciorek - the brother of former major-leaguer Tom Paciorek - batted 3 for 3. He had, it turned out, a career day. Literally.

That game, a 13-4 victory over the New York Mets, was the only major-league game in which Paciorek would play. He left baseball with a "lifetime" batting average of 1.000 - and the finest all-around one-game "career" in major-league history.

Each spring, when ballparks from Palm Springs, Calif., to Vero Beach, Fla., are teeming with excitement, John Paciorek, now 45, remembers. And he wonders what might have been.

Why did Paciorek drift into baseball obscurity - and immortality - after that brilliant debut?

Now living in San Gabriel, Calif., just outside Los Angeles, Paciorek said a chronic back condition deteriorated after the 1963 season. Though invited to spring training the next season, severe pain limited Paciorek's success and forced him to undergo back surgery. He never again reached the major leagues.

Even so, no one can take away The Game.

“It was like a dream - I couldn't believe it was happening,” said Paciorek, who is billed as a “one-day wonder” in the 1990 Guinness Book of World Records.

“I don't know why, but everything seemed to slow down when I faced major-league pitching.”

Paciorek's major-league career can be traced to 1962. Born and raised in Detroit, he earned high-school All-America honors in baseball, basketball and football. In 1962, during his senior year at St. Ladislaus High, Paciorek signed a contract with the Colt .45s, later to become the Astros.

General Manager Paul Richards had high hopes for the 6-foot-2, 210-pound Paciorek.

During his first spring training camp in 1963, Paciorek “hit everything in sight.” In an effort to facilitate his development, Richards sent Paciorek to the club's Class A team in Modesto, Calif., where he played well until suffering the back injury that ultimately would end his career. His intensity and obsession for exercise exacerbated the injury, hastening his departure from baseball.

“I was always hustling,” said Paciorek, now a schoolteacher. “I would sprint on and off the field. I would back up everybody. I played very much like Pete Rose even before Rose became known for it.

“I didn't do it for show - I always wanted to be the best I could be.”

The season began with a disappointed Paciorek (“I wanted to be like Al Kaline - I didn't want to spend a day in the minors.”) in Modesto and the Colts floundering. As the months passed, the Colts slid deeper into the second division. At the same time, Paciorek's physical problems - he also had developed a chronically sore throwing arm - worsened. So did his hitting.

With one game left on the schedule, Craft - in an effort to preview his young talent - decided to field a starting lineup that featured eight rookies, including Joe Morgan, Jim Wynn, Rusty Staub and Chris Zachary. Despite his slump, Paciorek - hurting but still hustling - was selected to start in right field.

“They asked me if I wanted to play, and I said ‘yeah,’ Paciorek said.

And play he did, lining a single down the third-base line and a single between shortstop and third base, and bouncing a third single deep into the hole.

“I don't remember any interviews after the game, but the next day my name was plastered all over the news,” he said. “They said, ‘This guy's here to stay.’ ”

In its account of the game, the New York Times wrote that Paciorek ``found nothing difficult about the majors," adding, ``Paciorek doesn't yet know what it's like to make an out in the big leagues."

The only person not surprised by his performance was Paciorek, who received a standing ovation before his final at-bat.

``I had hit way over .300 in spring training," Paciorek said. ``I always thought I belonged."

Of the eight rookies who started, only Paciorek and shortstop Glenn Vaughan never played again. The others, including Ivan Murrell and John Bateman, had long careers.

The next season, Paciorek returned for spring training. Still hurting, he couldn't hit or throw effectively. The Colts sent him back to the minors.

``I was terrible," he said. ``I did nothing."

By midseason, Paciorek had undergone back surgery. He spent 10 months in a back brace, then bounced around the minor leagues until Houston released him in 1967.

``They gave me every opportunity to make the team," he said. ``They bent over backward for me."

The Cleveland Indians invited him to spring training in 1968, sent him back to the minors, then released him in 1969. Paciorek's baseball career was finished.

Tom Paciorek, now a broadcaster for the Chicago White Sox, called the short duration of his brother's major-league career ``sad."

``He was much better than I was," said the younger Paciorek, who spent 18 years in the majors. ``He could have had a long major-league career."

John Paciorek views his unusual big-league career more philosophically than plaintively.

``It's kind of a dubious honor," he said. ``But I guess I'm immortalized. I did something no one else has ever done."

Perhaps the Houston Post said it best in its account of the game. In conferring upon Paciorek ``the unofficial major-league batting title," the newspaper waxed prophetic.

``The rest of (Paciorek's) career," it declared, tongue in cheek, ``may be an anticlimax."