

TEAMMATES 2020

A 21st Century "Old Aches & Pains" just gets hitters out

By **GLENN MILLER**
Roy Hobbs Baseball

Bill Harkins reminds some of his Winnepesaukee Muskrats teammates of Baseball Hall of Famer Luke Appling, whose nickname was "Old Aches and Pains."

They talk in endearing tones about the 70-year-old Harkins, who said he played for Appling in the Oakland A's farm system in the 1960s. Appling acquired the nickname because during his 20-year big-league he was known for often complaining about various ailments.

Harkins' teammates jokingly and fondly say the same can be said of their veteran pitcher.

Bill Scafidi said Harkins often arrives at games bemoaning his health.

Scafidi said Harkins often says, "I shouldn't even be here."

So, he's like a 21st century Old Aches and Pains.

"That's what we call him," said Scafidi, who has been a teammate of Harkins for 15 years.

Harkins' teammates are so fond of him and have such respect for him that they recommended he be featured in the 2020 Roy Hobbs World Series program. He was surprised by the honor.

"I'm going to kill those guys," Harkins jokingly said.

What about this comparison to Appling, who died in 1991? The Society for American Baseball Research referred, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, to Appling as "arguably the greatest hypochondriac ever to play the game."

But he could play. And so can Harkins, even at 70.

In September he pitched 8 2/3 innings in a game in the Rhode Island/Massachusetts League. He is on the Muskrats' 45s roster.

"Even though he could probably be a parent to many of us," Manager Mike Smith said.

Harkins doesn't overpower hitters.

Catcher Eric Norment knows Harkins wins with guile and craftiness



Photo courtesy of Eric Norment
Bill Harkins starts RIMA Hawks' first 50+ playoff game of 2020, allowing 0 earned runs in 4 2/3 innings.

and wisdom. From his spot behind home plate, Norment hears comments from frustrated hitters and players in the opposing dugout.

"You'll hear things like, why can't we hit this guy," Norment said.

Teammate Bill Scafidi also hears such comments. "All the time," he said.

Harkins brings a cool wisdom to the mound.

"He never gets rattled," Scafidi said.

Maybe that comes with age.

"He's older than most of the trees out in the field," said Smith, a mere lad of 51, 19 years younger than Harkins.

"He's a freaking gamer," teammate Tony Gonatas said.

Harkins wants the ball but doesn't demand that he keep going if he's reached his limit for a game. It's always team first, personal glory second.

Like most baseball players, Harkins has his quirks. Gonatas said Harkins always brings Necco Wafers to games. Their presence in dugouts is a mystery to Gonatas.

"I can't even find them in stores," Gonatas said. But Harkins, the Necco Kid, finds them somewhere.

Teammates talking about Harkins also share insights into the personality behind the pitcher.

Norment said he is extremely funny in a "sort of syncopated" way and that he is a "great storyteller."

Harkins has a storehouse of baseball stories going back to the 1960s and before many of his teammates were born.

Father Time, though, has been working over Harkins for a long time now. Gonatas has seen the velocity of Harkins' fastball diminish.

"Ten, 12 years ago he was throwing like 80," Gonatas said.

Not now. Not in the year he turned 70. But he still gets hitters out, still baffles and flummoxes and vexes much younger hitters with his know-how and assortment of pitches and changes of speed.

Harkins is more than a pitcher. He is a teammate.

"He's an awesome teammate," Scafidi said.

Norment said Harkins is his team's traditional opening day starter in the league.

"He's so smooth," Norment said. "Such a pro. So economical in his pitching motion. He's so adaptable."

To Norment, Harkins is a pitcher, not a thrower.

"He's 70 years old and still

see HARKINS on page 23

HARKINS

continued from page 21

developing new pitches," Norment said.

He honed his craft a long time ago. Harkins was around other legends and near legends in addition to Appling. Harkins was selected by the A's on the 13th round of the 1967 draft. Oakland's first pick of the second round that year was a fire-balling lefty from Louisiana named Vida Blue.

Harkins said he and Blue roomed together for a while and he remembers Blue as a shy young man. Harkins was also young. He turned 17 in 1967 when he began his pro career playing for the A's Gulf Coast League team based in Bradenton.

Harkins said he received a bonus of a few thousand dollars for signing. He doesn't recall precisely. But he knows what he did with it. Harkins bought a 1967 GTO convertible for \$3,167.

Like any person of a certain age, Harkins has some regrets. One of his is not reporting to winter ball at the

end of a season. Pitching coach Bill Posedel urged him to participate but the teenage Harkins was homesick.

"I'm a stupid kid," said Harkins, now a retired police officer.

So, instead of reporting to Arizona with other A's prospects he returned home to Massachusetts. But he didn't tell the coaching staff the real reason. He told them he was returning to start college.

"I lied," Harkins admitted.

Would participating in fall ball have propelled Harkins to the big leagues? He doesn't know one way or the other.

But he does know the A's farm system at that time was brimming with talented players who would form the heart of the formidable Oakland teams of the 1970s that won three consecutive World Series.

That includes Reggie Jackson, Blue, Blue Moon Odom, Rollie Fingers, Joe Rudi, Sal Bando and Gene Tenace. But the name of Bill Harkins was not on the fall roster when it could have been.

"My name should have been on it," Harkins said of the winter ball roster. "I'm not saying I would have made it,"

see HARKINS on page 90

HARKINS

continued from page 23

but Harkins was with Blue on the Burlington Bees of the Class A Midwest League in 1968.

Blue was 8-11 that year but a closer look at his statistics hint at what was to come. He posted a 2.49 ERA and struck out 231 in 152 inning. He was on his way. Blue reached the majors in 1969 and in 1971 was 24-8 with a league-leading 1.82 ERA and won the American League MVP and Cy Young Awards.

In 1968, Harkins was 1-1 with a 4.50 ERA and 7 strikeouts in 18 innings.

By 1971, Harkins had already been out of pro ball for two years. But more than half a century later, he still has vivid memories of Blue. He recalls a no-hitter Blue pitched against the Twins' affiliate, the Wisconsin Rapids Twins.

"All he threw was a fastball," Harkins said.

Speaking of baseball names from the past. ... Harkins was often in the same room as one of the biggest names in baseball history - Joe DiMaggio. DiMaggio was then a coach with the A's and Harkins saw DiMaggio sitting in the clubhouse every day during spring training. Now at 70, Harkins wishes he had had the gumption as a young man to ask DiMaggio questions.

"I'd just say, 'Hi, Mr. DiMaggio,'" Harkins said.

In recent years his Roy Hobbs teammates have included 1984 Heisman Trophy winner Doug Flutie,

Now, Harkins has played Roy Hobbs Baseball for many more years than he played professionally. He's been coming to Fort Myers for the World Series every fall since he was 53 or 54. He's not precisely sure of the year.

He has made adjustments to keep playing. Harkins said he no longer uses a windup.

"I go from the stretch," he said.

It's no stretch to say Bill Harkins has enjoyed an amazing baseball life that includes Vida Blue, Luke Appling, Joe DiMaggio and above all - his teammates.

He's back for another World Series.

"Playing here is the best baseball I've ever played," Harkins said.

Maybe baseball life begins at 70.

That life centers around his teammates, men such as Mike Smith, Bill Scafidi, Eric Norment, Tony Gonatas, Doug Flutie and others.

"It's just the camaraderie," Harkins said. "I'm lucky to be playing baseball at my age."



*Photo courtesy of Eric Norment.
Bill Harkins*