

# MAX PATKIN



**THE CLOWN PRINCE**

July 29, 1990--

ROCKFORD, ILL--- A withered blue sports bag sits on the clean floor of the Rockford Expos' locker room. The big old bag is miles apart from newer and slicker bags in its presence. It looks itinerant and lonely, like a love letter lost in the mail.

Max Patkin, the Clown Prince of Baseball, reaches deep into the old bag. He pulls out a creased Montreal Expos baseball cap, circa Coco Laboy. He removes a couple of crushed soft-drink cans. He takes out a dirty red kerchief. Patkin treats each item with care, as if they were Egyptian artifacts.

Patkin scratches his head and mumbles to himself, "Now, where'd I put my glove?" It is a historic glove, given to Patkin by Jim Thorpe when they appeared as part of an early 1950s sports tour that featured noted flycaster Ted Williams. Someone points out the glove is above Patkin, on a shelf that belongs to one of the Expos' young Class A players. Next summer, when Patkin returns to Rockford, that shelf will belong to someone else.

But Max Patkin always will belong to baseball.

This year, Patkin commemorates his 50th season in professional baseball - 45 years as a baseball clown and five years as a minor-league pitcher. Patkin, 70, bounces around the bush leagues in small-town America - he'll perform at a Kenosha game Thursday - and lives out of his sad sack. On the side of it is embroidered for all baggage handlers to see: "Max Patkin - The Clown Prince of Baseball."

Patkin never wanted to be the Clown Prince of Baseball. When he was pitching sandlot ball in his native Philadelphia, there already had been a clown prince - ex-Washington Senators pitcher Nick Altrock, whose best-known bit was to wrestle himself. Altrock was followed by Al Schacht.

But no one has clowned around longer than Patkin.

"It's not a clever act," Patkin says as he puts on his uniform before a recent appearance during an Expos-Peoria Chiefs game here. The baggy scarecrow ensemble with a "?" stitched on the back is one of three sets of original 1959 pinstriped White Sox uniforms Patkin travels with. "It's a dumb act. I try to work along the side of the game. Every act has to have a pattern. But the ballpark, the game and the crowd controls my act. I make it up as I go along."

When people say Patkin's act is timeless, they mean it. Over the years, I have seen

Patkin perform in minor-league ballparks in Memphis, San Jose and Buffalo. Over the years, I have seen Patkin dance to "Rock Around the Clock," spurt water and smoke from his mouth and teach the home team to hit, which he punctuates by scooting down the third-base line. Patkin traditionally signs off by getting tossed out of the game. He claims to have been thrown out of more baseball games than anyone in history.

"I also threw my leg up higher (as a pitcher) than anybody in the history of baseball," Patkin says. He gets up from a stool and moves to the center of the locker room. Actually, Patkin never moves anywhere. He staggers as if he's heading into a brisk winter's wind snapping down Michigan Avenue.

"I can't do it on account of my knee, but I'd go higher than (Juan) Marichal or (Warren) Spahn," Patkin says, slowly lifting his leg. You grimace because you almost can hear his leg creak. "The leg would go way above my head, and I'd rear back. I had a 90-mile-an-hour fastball. My first year (1940), I had over 200 strikeouts."

But Mad Max also had 32 wild pitches. That is an eternal season record for Wisconsin Rapids in the defunct Wisconsin State League. It got Patkin thinking about something else besides baseball, a notion that was reinforced when he was injured in a collision at home plate in 1941. Patkin was covering home after uncorking a wild pitch, of course. The runner scored from second, sliding into Patkin's arm. Patkin faced a bone-chip operation, and his arm was never the same.

A year later, Patkin began his clown act while pitching for the Navy against the Army in an eight-team Special Service league. Most of the major-league players who were in the service played in this touring league.

"Joe DiMaggio hit a home run off me," Patkin says. "Something came over me. As he rounded first base, I ran behind him stride for stride, 150 pounds of nose. That was in front of 10,000 servicemen. Everybody went crazy. Red Ruffing came out with Joe Gordon. They shook my hand at home plate and walked me back to the mound. My commanding officer was the great Bill Dickey, and he started getting phone calls about when that goofy guy was going to pitch again.

"I was a funny-looking guy in those days."

Patkin laughs hard at his joke, exposing one last tooth that hangs like a garage light bulb. After the war, Patkin tried professional baseball for the final time. He pitched for the Wilkes-Barre (Pa.) Barons and was given his release on Max Patkin Night. Harrisburg, a competing Cleveland Indians farm club, hired Patkin to coach first base in an exhibition game with their parent team.

Indians manager Lou Boudreau already had seen Patkin pitch batting practice between the noon starts in Oakland and the 3 p.m. starts in San Francisco in the old Pacific Coast League.

Boudreau recalls, "Max was the funniest thing I ever saw on the mound. I fell off the bench laughing. He was about 6-6 (actually 6-feet-3) and had a long neck. He was very agile, and he could dance with the best of them. I called (Indians owner) Bill Veeck after our game and told him of Max. I knew how Bill loved fan entertainment. I remember in one of Max's first games, he made fun of the umpire on a low pitch, holding his hand about six inches off the ground. Max was thrown out of the game. That hurt his feelings. We took care of the \$50 fine."

In the autumn of his life, there are gentle rumbles about Patkin being placed into Baseball's Hall of Fame. Patkin estimates he has performed more than 5,000 times, covering almost 5 million miles in the name of baseball.

"I'm not ashamed to tell you this because I have nobody to go to the front for me," Patkin says with unusual levity. "I'm in the minor leagues 95 percent of the time (occasionally he'll do a major-league game when teams are out of a pennant race), lost in the rest of the country. Unbeknownst to me, two years ago my sister wrote to the Hall of Fame curator. It took them almost three months to respond.

"When she got the letter, she forwarded it to me. They said there is no place in the Hall for anybody outside of baseball. It was just for ballplayers, umpires, broadcasters and executives - and that's wrong. I'm not a circus man; I've been a baseball man. I feel like I'm part of the game. I'm not rich. I saved a little money.

"The only bad part in 50 years is being by yourself. Tomorrow, I got to be in Omaha. Then Calgary, flying through Dallas. Then Edmonton. From there, I fly to Nashville, then to Bristol, Tenn., over to Scranton/ Wilkes-Barre . . ."

Patkin excuses himself. It is already the third inning, and Peoria leads the Expos 1-0 on a Damon Berryhill home run. With head bowed, Patkin rambles slowly down the dark tunnel that leads to the Expos' dugout. It is the only occasion Patkin is out of his staggering clown stride, for even clowns walk with care when they walk through time.