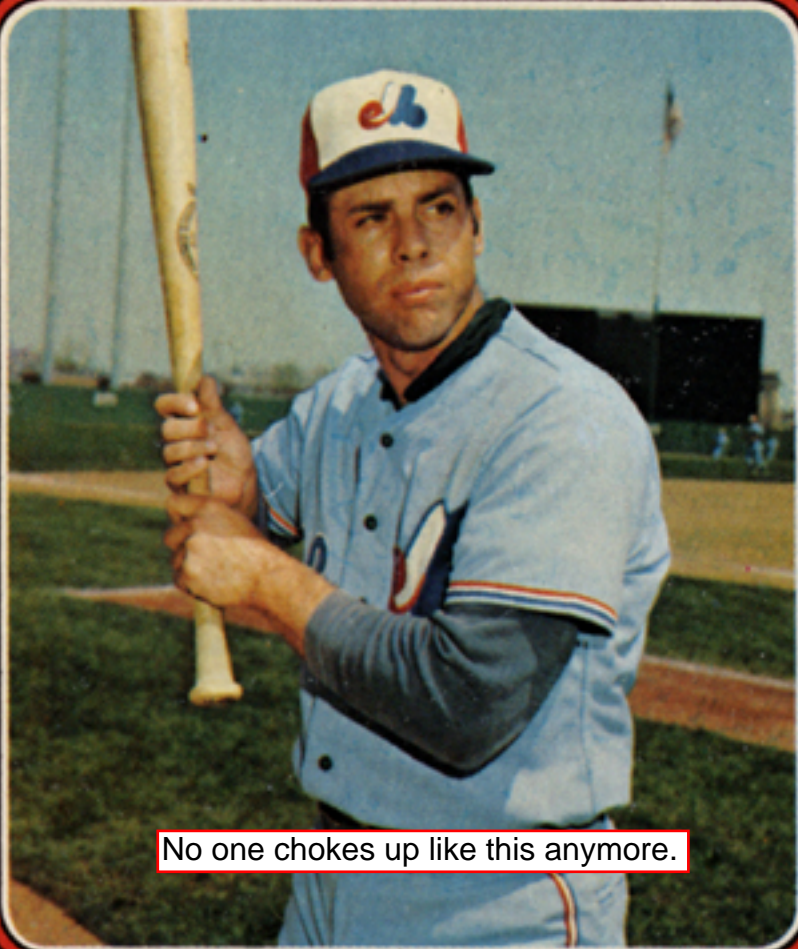


**MONTREAL**

**2nd BASE**



No one chokes up like this anymore.

**RON  
HUNT**

**EXPOS**

Sept. 14, 1998--

WENTZVILLE, Mo.--- St. Louis Cardinals slugger Mark McGwire makes glamorous history on a daily basis at Busch Stadium. But baseball's gritty work ethic blossoms in the shadows of old trees 50 miles west of Park Mark on Interstate 70 in the farming community of Wentzville.

Ron Hunt lives there.

Hunt, 57, is still a sultan of sweat.

He symbolizes an era when players choked up on the bat with two strikes. He was all spikes from the top of his crewcut to the bottom of his cleats. He is best known for holding the major-league record for the most times getting hit by a pitch in one season (50 in 1971).

Lost in the great 1998 home-run chase is Pittsburgh Pirates catcher Jason Kendall's assault on Hunt's record. Kendall has been hit 27 times.

"Aw, that's nothing," Hunt said during a conversation in his dining room. "I did whatever I had to do to get hit. But I never got called once for getting hit on purpose. The rule was to make an attempt (to get out of the way), so I'd work in front of a mirror to make sure when I turned inside, I was straight up and down, right on the corner of the plate. If I had trouble with a pitcher, I had to find some way to take something away from them."

In 1971, Hunt was the starting second baseman for the Montreal Expos. Cubs pitcher Milt Pappas hit Hunt for the 50th time on Sept. 29 in Montreal.

"It was a 3-1 changeup," Hunt said. "It just ticked me. (Cubs manager) Leo Durocher went crazy. I just looked at Leo and went . . ."

Hunt puckered his lips and smiled.

Don Baylor holds the modern major-league record with 267 career HBPs. Hunt remains the all-time National League leader with 243 HBPs. And Hunt never wore bulky football elbow guards like annual HBP leader Craig Biggio of the Houston Astros.

"They all hurt," said Hunt, shrugging his rugged shoulders. "(Tom) Seaver hit me in the head in San Francisco. Denny Lemaster hit me in the hamstring, and before I could catch my balance, I pulled it. Lots of broken fingers. I played with them. I just put tape on them."

Hunt was hit by a pitch three times in one spring-training game. He told reporters he was simply getting ready for the regular season.

Hunt understands that some people give their bodies to science.

"I gave mine to baseball," he said.

Hunt has had three operations on his left knee, one on his right knee, one on his left shoulder and two on his right shoulder. Next he will undergo hip-replacement surgery.

The Hunt ethic is sorely missed in baseball today. The Baltimore Orioles once asked Hunt to be a coach, and several years ago Hank Aaron approached him about joining the Atlanta Braves as a minor-league manager.

"I wasn't going back to a bus league," Hunt said.

Since 1985, Hunt has run a self-supporting summer baseball school for players ages 14 to 18 on his 110-acre farm. He invites players from all over the country and Canada. He books games for them and invites college coaches to watch the games, hoping to make connections. His program has generated 150 scholarships in 13 years. Major-league teams have drafted five of his players.

Several years ago, Hunt built his own infield in his front yard. He used his own topsoil, leveled it and crowned it. He drags it and waters it every day during the summer.

A native of north St. Louis, Hunt and his wife, Jackie, have lived in Wentzville since 1964. They've been married for 37 years. They have three children between 26 and 33.

"We've been going together since high school," Hunt said.

The den of their ranch house is full of precious memorabilia covering Hunt's major-league career, which ran from 1963 to 1974. The baseballs that hit Hunt for the 49th and 50th time in 1971 sit together as part of a trophy in a glass case. Hunt has an amazing collection of bobbing-head baseball dolls. And beneath the trophy case are dozens of big black scrapbooks Jackie has kept. Each scrapbook represents a year Hunt played in the major leagues.

Jackie prepares balanced meals for the campers in a mess hall that's in a renovated barn. The walls of the kitchen are dotted with vintage baseball bats, a blown-up picture of Hunt's 1974 Expos baseball card and Hunt's old uniforms, all neatly framed.

Hunt played for some impressive managers during his career. Walter Alston was his manager in 1967 when he played for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Casey Stengel was his first manager when he broke into the big leagues as the starting second baseman for the 1963 New York Mets. Hunt hit .272 with 10 home runs and 42 RBI. He struck out only 50 times in 533 at-bats. He was runner-up to Pete Rose for NL Rookie of the Year.

Gene Mauch managed Hunt in the early 1970s with the Expos. In 1972, Mauch said he never had enjoyed watching someone play a season of baseball as much as he had Hunt.

Mauch was inspired by what he called the greatest at-bat he ever saw. In 1971, the Expos were in the ninth inning of a scoreless tie with the Mets, with Nolan Ryan pitching for New York.

"Nolan hit me on a 3-2 pitch," Hunt said. "Then he walked three guys. And we beat them 1-0.

"I'll never know why they started hitting me. I know with Casey, it was \$50 or a suit of clothes if you got hit with the bases loaded and the winning run would score. You'd always take the money because his tailor wasn't worth (bleep)."

Sitting in a nearby recliner, Jackie wondered, "Mark McGwire is a good athlete, but why hasn't anyone decked him? He hasn't gone down once this whole season. You know where he'd be if he faced (Bob) Gibson."

Hunt concurred.

"All that posing and mugging for the cameras? (Don) Drysdale never would have put up with that," Hunt said.

And you can be sure Hunt never would have put up with Cubs players congratulating McGwire rounding the bases after his record-tying and -breaking home runs last week. The Cubs are in a wild-card race, and they dropped two important games in St. Louis.

Hunt precipitated a brawl in a 1964 game between the non-contending Mets and the Milwaukee Braves. Stengel, then 73, jumped into the fray in defense of his scrappy second baseman.

"(Mets catcher) Jesse Gonder hit a grounder to third base," Hunt said. "I was on second. I thought they were going to go for a double play. So I rounded third, (heading) for home. Frank Bolling was a veteran second baseman, so he threw home and I barreled into (Braves catcher) Ed Bailey, which started a fight. Sure, I was out. But you either slid into 'em or ran over 'em if they had the ball. Casey ran out of the dugout and jumped on Denis Menke's back. Menke just shook him off,

and there was Casey on the ground kickin' and scratchin'."

Hunt credits his work ethic to his grandfather Walter Gronmeyer.

"I come from a split home," he said. "I didn't play organized ball until I was 12 because there wasn't any. There was just sandlots. Grandpa and my uncle Kenny (Gronmeyer) were cartball players. At 12, I started playing organized ball. And we just played, night and day. Indian ball. Rundowns. Stickball. Bottle caps. You played however you could. It's called priorities."

Although Busch Stadium is less than an hour away, Hunt hasn't been to a Cardinals game in several years.

"I don't follow major-league baseball much," he said. "The reason I don't follow it much is I guess they play a little different than we did years ago. And the guys before us played a little different than we did. I can take it for so much until they start talking to each other (opponents) on the field and stop hustling."

Hunt looks away at his homemade infield through a living-room window. The morning clouds have broken, and the sun blankets the red dirt. Hunt doesn't have time to think about the big shots of McGwire further on down the road. He has work to do.