

The following is a story that I wrote a few years ago on Jim Johnson. This was originally writted for a book published by SABR came “One Hit Wonders.’ This was my original story that I sent to the head authors of this book. After seeing the story from below the administrators of this book were appalled as I found out they wanted a very sterile story. I was then forced to chop thousands of words from my story of Johnson much to my displeasure.

After doing considerable research for this story I was stunned at how great a baseball player Jim Johnson was in his all too short lifetime. Jim still holds many records at WMU including the best winning percentage as a pitcher (18-2) and the lowest ERA. An argument surely good be made for Johnson as posting the greatest all around record for Western Michigan.

Here is my story before the editors of the book ‘One Win Wonders’ put it on the choppiong block:

Jim Johnson

Written by Jim Moyes

Jim Johnson may have second thoughts if he grew up in today’s era of millionaire ball players.

However, the southpaw who pitched for one season with the 1970 San Francisco Giants, valued family and a desire to become an educator more important values than remaining in the big leagues.

It wasn’t that Johnson didn’t love the game of baseball, for he set a goal in his childhood years to someday play in the Big Show. Mission accomplished ---when he began the 1970 season with the Giants.

When a big-league contract for the following season was sent to Johnson, Giant personnel had to have been very surprised when Johnson politely declined the offer. Johnson was not at all enamored with many of the behind the scenes issues that went with the territory of a professional baseball player and was bent on achieving yet another goal — that as an educator.

Just as he did by reaching the top rung of the ladder in baseball, Johnson did the same in the field of education. Before succumbing to cancer at the much too young age of 42 in December of 1987, Johnson reached the top of his profession as Superintendent of Schools at North Muskegon, Michigan High School.

Born on November 3, 1945 Jim Johnson was the son of Ed and Dorothy Johnson, the second of two children raised by his parents. Father Ed Johnson was born Dec 16, 1903 and graduated from Otisville, Michigan High, and later attended Western Michigan. Ed was a standout catcher for the Broncos, leading the team in hitting in 1930, a feat accomplished twice by his son Jim in the 1960s. 1. While attending Western, Ed married Dorothy Watson on Nov 19, 1929 and both would become school educators.

Ed briefly got a taste for the big-league lifestyle as a bullpen catcher for the Chicago White Sox in the 1920s before enrolling at Western State Normal college (Now Western Michigan U). During his brief stay with the ChiSox Ed had the foresight to ask members of the White Sox roster to sign a baseball, a memento that remains in the Johnson family to this day.

Jim was a 7-year old youngster in elementary school in Muskegon, Michigan in 1953, when the Korean War finally reached a truce in August of that same year. This was more than welcome news for Jim and his parents as his brother Bill Johnson, who was captured and was a Prisoner of War, was freed as a POW and would be soon reunited with his family.

Although he was only 8 years of age in 1954, he became an instant starter and a little league phenom who played five years for a program that consisted of players from the ages of 8-12. Johnson was taught the finer concepts of baseball by his father Ed, who coached all of Jim’s teams during his Little League career.

“My dad taught me everything I knew. He made me practice and practice and constantly gave me all those hints that were so much help” said Johnson in a Muskegon (MI) Chronicle newspaper feature story written by Mart Tardani. 2

There were a couple of pitching duals during his youth as a Little Leaguer that clearly stood out. Johnson and his pitching opponent pitched 6 scoreless innings in each game, but both had to depart after the 6th frame due to Little League regulations. His opponent and future high school teammate and classmate Ray Newman, would also go on to pitch in the major leagues. 3

The move from throwing from the much shorter Little League distance to the standard 60’6 mound didn’t bother Johnson. Playing for the Kiwanis team in the Pony League as a 13-year old, Johnson struck out 20 of the 21 batters he faced in a 2-0 victory.4 However, tragedy struck during the season when Jim’s father and team manager passed away suddenly from a massive heart attack. Just days following his father’s death, a grieving Jim Johnson struck out 15 batters in the championship game. However, despite the 3-hitter pitched by Johnson, an unearned run in the last inning led to a 1-0 loss. 5

Johnson was a winner, and a big winner, all throughout his amateur years. He played on 3 division winners in Little League, 3 straight titles in all 3 of his years in Pony League and during the summer he led his Connie Mack teams to a win in every regular season contest. 6 In the opening game of the State Connie Mack tournament Johnson pitched a 1 hitter and helped his own cause with a pair of hits in an 8-0 1 hit shutout victory over a team from Wyandotte. MI. 7

Hard to believe, but It would get even better.

As teammates in their senior year (1963) for the Big Reds of Muskegon High, Jim Johnson and Ray Newman would win 21 of 22 games and Johnson was selected as his team’s MVP. Johnson and Newman were part of a rare fraternity of high school pitchers that graduated from the same high school class that would also pitch in the major leagues. 8

Although Johnson would make it to the ‘Big Show’ as a pitcher, he also was a standout with the bat and the glove. As a senior in high school, he stole 21 bases, drew 25 walks, scored 33 runs, and hit .386 from his leadoff position. 9

Muskegon won the North Division High School Championship of their league as Johnson pitched a 1-0 shutout over their arch-rivals from Muskegon Heights, fanning 17 opponents in a 9-inning game before Muskegon plated the winning run. In an earlier 8-3 semi-final victory over Traverse City, Johnson had 3 of Muskegon’s 9 hits to help his winning pitcher Newman earn the win. 10

Earlier in the season, Johnson & Newman each pitched 3 innings as they combined for a no-hitter in the season opening 16-0 thrashing of Muskegon Christian. Johnson aided his teammate Newman in a 9-0 victory over powerful Grand Haven by belting out 3 hits as Newman tossed a splendid one-hitter. 11 In a resounding 14-3 win over Reeths Puffer, Johnson had five hits in the victory. 12 In the season finale Johnson earned a 4-1 victory over Benton Harbor to earn the Big Reds the conference championship. 13

Following graduation from Muskegon High Johnson joined an independent team called the Muskegon Pepsis. So dominate was this ‘nine’ that they assembled a 32 game winning streak. Instrumental in ending the long streak would be a future teammate of Johnson at Western Michigan---John Sluka, who had 3 hits before embarking on a fine career for WMU. Sluka would enter professional baseball after being drafted by the Chicago White Sox in the 1965 draft, 3 spots ahead of a guy by the name of Nolan Ryan. 14

The step up in talent posed no problem for Johnson. Playing for the Pepsis, Johnson’s record was 4-1 following an 8-1 4 hit victory over Ionia, where he again was a leading batsman with a double & a single. In addition to his sterling pitching on the mound in the highly competitive United Baseball League, Johnson batted a lofty .421. 15

It was now on to Western Michigan University for the talented left-handed thrower and batter where he received a scholarship – not for baseball – but for his brilliant academic achievements at Muskegon High.

Western Michigan for many years, dating back into the 1940’s and well into the 1960s, was widely regarded as the program that played the best brand of baseball of any university in Michigan. In a stretch from 1952 to 1963 Western made the trip to Omaha and the College World Series 6 times, including a runner-up finish in 1955. From 1949-1967 the Broncos dominated the Mid-American Conference by winning 13 titles.

Like all freshman competing at the D1 level until 1970 Johnson was ineligible to compete for Western until his sophomore season.

Recruited as an outfielder by the Broncos, Jim made zero appearances on the mound while playing on the Freshman team. He did impress his Freshman coach Fred Stevens, WMU’s first All-American from the early 1940s, as an outfielder by hitting a respectable .325 for the yearlings. 16

In the Fall of 1964 (Oct 20) at the annual Alumni game, the WMU alumni edged the upcoming 1965 varsity 5-3. The alumni included such former MLB stalwarts as Jim Boutin, Phil Regan, Charley Maxwell, Ron Jackson and Wayne Terwilliger. While Johnson was patrolling the outfield, the home plate umpire was yet another Bronco MLB player, who would make his distinction in baseball as a long time NL umpire, Frank Secory. 17

After biding his time playing for the freshman team, Johnson would make an immediate impact for his veteran coach Charlie Maher. In addition to patrolling center field when not pitching for the Broncos, Johnson began his record setting career by compiling a perfect 6-0 record and a team low ERA of 1.98 in 1965, while also handing Ohio University its only defeat on the season. Ohio U would end their year with an all-time best mark of 26-1. Johnson not only went the distance in the 2-1 win, he also scored the winning run by being on the front end of a double steal.

“Western Michigan’s baseball record of 16-6 and 9-1 in the league play was somewhat unexpected this year. And most of the credit belongs to a sophomore southpaw, Jim Johnson of Muskegon,” wrote Jerry Hagan of the Kalamazoo Gazette. Johnson ended his first year as a Bronco by beating Michigan State on a two hitter. Jim was one of four Broncos selected to the Mid-AM first team. 18

Among his 6 victories was a one hitter with 13 strikeouts in a conference match up with Marshall University. Only a ‘seeing-eye’ single in the second inning would deprive Johnson, not only of a no hitter but also a perfect game as it would prove to be Marshall’s only baserunner. Johnson was none too shabby as a hitter either. Johnson finished his sophomore campaign by leading hitting a healthy .325 in 26 games played. 19

Among the many highlights for Jim and his teammates in 1965 came when they ended Michigan’s 10 game winning streak before 2,000 fans at Hyames Field. Leading the way for the Broncos were high school teammates Johnson and John Huizenga. The former battery mates at Muskegon High had 5 hits between them, including a booming triple by Johnson. Huizenga nearly made it to the big leagues, capping his career at AAA for the Toledo Mudhens in the Detroit Tiger organization. 20

Johnson may have been even more dominant during the summer following his college sophomore season while pitching for the Muskegon Pepsis. In a typical Johnson outing, he was next to invincible in an 8-0 shutout over a local city league opponent. In a game called due to a ‘mercy’ rule, Johnson faced 15 batters and fanned 14 in a game called after 5 innings. The only batter who put the ball in play was out attempting to bunt. 21

In the NBC (National Baseball Congress) playoffs, the Pepsis began their playoff run with a 6-0 shut-out victory over a team from Belding with Johnson hurling a 3-hit shutout. Johnson again was a standout in the game with a pair of singles and two walks in a perfect day at the plate. 22

Later in the playoffs in Grand Rapids, Jim Johnson won both games of the double header with some stellar work in relief. In the first game, Johnson came on in relief in the 10th inning to get credit for the victory. In the nightcap of the twin bill he came on in relief of future St. Louis Cardinal farmhand Ron Jancek to allow Ann Arbor but one hit the rest of the way. Johnson would then score what would prove to be the winning run when he scored on a single by Glenn Merchant, the father of former Michigan State University women’s basketball coach Susie Merchant. 23

In this prestigious tournament Jim, not only was selected to the all-tournament team, but was elected as the MVP of the entire gala. Joining Johnson on this all-star team was the former Detroit Tiger slugger from nearby Paw Paw, Charley Maxwell, who amassed 3 homers. One of the pitchers on this all-star squad was University of Michigan pitching ace John Kerr, grandfather of the player with the same name who led the Wolverines to the NCAA runner-up title in 2018. 24

The Pepsis were eliminated from the tourney by a ‘stacked’ Grand Rapids Sullivans lineup as Chet Atkins, who toiled for Syracuse of the AAA International League, eliminated the Pepsis by hurling a 6-0 shutout. A thorn in Atkins side, however, was Johnson, who touched up the former minor league star for three of the Pepsis 7 hits, a triple and a pair of booming doubles.

The Sullivans would advance to the National Baseball Congress in Wichita but they would bolster their lineup by adding Johnson and his Pepsi teammate Merchant to their roster. 25

Johnson would help the Sullivans claim a 5-2 victory when he made a stellar catch from his center field spot for what appeared to be a base hit to end the threat and preserve the victory. Playing next to Johnson in right field was future major leaguer Rick Miller who blasted a home run in the victory. 26

There was no let up from Jim in his second season with Western. In one of his columns for the Kalamazoo Gazette Jerry Hagan tabbed Johnson as its best pitcher, best outfielder and best hitter. Adding further proof to his laurels, Johnson was also the team’s leading base stealer. 27

WMU was 21-5 in 1966 and was deprived of a trip to Omaha as they lost to Ohio State in the districts NCAA playoffs. Adding salt to the wounds, during the regular season WMU defeated OSU 3 times. The Broncos played the Buckeyes early in the season in Columbus and swept the 3-game series. The highlight of the sweep was Johnson hurling a 1 hitter against the Buckeyes to hand his veteran coach Charlie Maher his 400th victory as the Broncos head coach. 28

In the opening round of the 1966 NCAA tournament at Ohio State, Johnson did not pitch in their victory over Southern Illinois. Instead Johnson whacked 5 hits and drove in 4 runs as the Broncos crushed Southern Illinois as he pushed his batting average on the season to a lofty .463. 29

And how good was Ohio State in 1966? Good enough that they would go on to win the NCAA championship in Omaha. And how good was Johnson in 1966? Jim would post a

5-2 record on the mound, that included a big win in relief against the University of Michigan. Jim was even better as a hitter.

It was always duly noted in many of the articles written for WMU baseball throughout his brilliant college career that he always preferred to play in the outfield but would ‘help’ out if needed. In a story from the May 19, 1965 the Western Herald, Jim acknowledged: “I would rather play the outfield than pitch any day, but I want to help the team in any way I can.” ‘All’ he hit as a batsman as a Junior for the Broncos was a lofty .415. His .500 batting average during conference play was tops in the league. He led his team in triples (5), and set a school record slugging percentage of .677, a mark that would not be broken at WMU until the NCAA went with the metal bats. And when does a pitcher lead his team in stolen bases? He did it twice – in 1966 and 1967. As a fielder, he had no peers. Shockingly, despite these astounding all around numbers as a pitcher and hitter, Johnson, who led the entire MAC in hitting, was relegated to the 2nd Team All-MAC team, depriving him of first team ALL MAC in all three seasons as a collegian. 30

Although he was coveted by many teams following his junior season, Jim had made it clear that he was intent on finishing his schooling at Western and would not enter the draft. “The offer would have to be awful tempting before I’d ever leave school” said Jim in an interview with Mart Tardani of the Muskegon Chronicle. The Detroit Tigers did take a flyer on Jim and made him the last player to be drafted (36th round) in the June 1966 draft, an offer certainly not appealing for Jim. 31

Johnson after his first two season for the Broncos, where as a pitcher he suffered but 2 losses in 2 seasons while also patrolling centerfield, would play his summer ball in 1966in Rapid City, SD in the Basin League. After hitting over .400 at WMU, Johnson was recruited to play center field for Rapid City. Told to concentrate on playing the field as advised by scouts, Johnson was asked to work one inning in relief, and he complied by striking out the side. 32

And, just as Charley Maher quickly discovered his pitching acumen at WMU, so did Rapid City manager Floyd Temple recognize his pitching talents. In his pitching debut on July 9 Jim pitched a 2 hit 8-0 shutout over Mobridge. 33

The Basin league in the 1960s was comprised of numerous players who would go on to star in the Major Leagues. On the Rapid City 1966 team 5 players on their roster would make it all the way to the ‘Show,’ including Jim Johnson. Lou Camilli played 4 seasons with the Cleveland Indians. Another of his teammates was Danny Thompson. Thompson passed away from Leukemia just weeks after his last MLB appearance in 1976 at the age of 29. Gary Neibaurer pitched for the Braves and Phillies where he compiled a career record of 4-8. Outfielder Gary Moore had a brief stint with the LA Dodgers. One of his teammates was more recognized for his talents as a football player at Kansas, Junior Riggins, brother of Super Bowl XVII MVP John Riggins. 34

Jim was named the teams MVP in a ceremony at home plate prior to their game on Aug 8, 1966 before nearly 3,000 loyal fans. Jim would hit .281 for the campaign with 2 HR and 16 rbi while batting out of the lead-off position. His 14 stolen bases set a Rapid City franchise record for thefts. 35

Now back to college. How did he ‘help out’ on the mound in his senior season for WMU? In the Official Baseball Statistics published by the National Collegiate Athletic Bureau on May 20, 1967, Johnson’s minuscule ERA of 0.17 in 53 1/3 innings of work led the entire nation! His 24 hits allowed for the entire season were the fewest allowed by any NCAA pitcher who compiled 50 or more innings.

Midway through his senior season Johnson had posted 6 straight victories, with 5 of those wins being shutouts. In 53 1/3 innings of work, Johnson had allowed but one earned run. The lone run tallied against Johnson was in his 5th victory when he defeated Notre Dame 8-1. Again, Johnson helped his own cause against the Irish with a double and a single that drove in 3 runs as 1800 fans looked on at Hyames Field, the only field to host the NCAA tournament (1947&1948) outside of Omaha. 36

By using his bat, as well as his arm, Jim pitched a two-hitter, went 2-3 at the plate and scored 2 of the Broncos 6 runs in a 3-1 victory over Bowling Green. The two hits off Johnson included a slow roller down the third base line and an opposite field looper. The only run scored off Jim was his own undoing on a wild pitch. 37

In a heralded pitching duo late in the 1967 season, Johnson handed Ohio U pitcher Jerry McConnell his first defeat of the season as Western took over first place in the MAC with a 5-0 victory. The victory over the Bobcats elevated Western up to fourth in the USA rankings, behind only Stanford, Southern California and Minnesota. Johnson gave up but two hits, one a swinging bunt down the third base and, as usual, led his team in hitting with 2 hits and 2 rbi. The two hits pushed Johnson into his squad’s batting lead with a .356 average. 38

Earlier in the season Johnson fanned 16 Miami hitters in a 1-0 squeaker and struck out 13 in a 5-0 whitewash of Kent State and a future baseball icon. 39

There were only 2 unanimous choices on the 1967 All MAC team, Johnson and Kent State’s sophomore hitting sensation Thurmon Munson. He ended the season with a perfect 7-0 record while hitting .339 and leading the team in rbi with 16. 40

Johnson’s name is all over the record book at Western, both in hitting and pitching. Johnson’s WMU Honors: *One must take note that Freshman were not eligible to play prior to 1970.*

Pitching:

Career ERA: Ranks 1st 1.34

Career Winning Pct: Ranks 1st: 18-2

Career Strikeouts: 192 (2nd to all-time but over only a 3-year span)

Season WMU Leaders:

Innings pitched: 70 in 1967, 58.1 in 1965

Strike outs: 1965 & 1967

Wins: 7 in 1967

ERA: 0.45 in 1967 (3rd in nation)

Hitting:

1st in hitting: .415 1966 (Led MAC at .500), .339 in 1967

1st in RBI: 1967 (16)

1st in triples: 1966 (5)

1st in OBP: .496 in 1966, .438 in 1967

1st in SLG PCT: 1966 .677 (A record that lasted through the Wooden Bat era and still 5th best in WMU history)

1st in SB: 1966 & Tied for 1st in 1967 41

There have been many great players that have donned the WMU uniform over the years, including many who went on to notable MLB careers. However, the argument can be easily made for Jim Johnson as the best overall player in their storied history. Jim was inducted into the WMU Athletic Hall of Fame in 1997, which leads this author to wonder why it took so long.

After inking a contract that included a sizable bonus with the Giants, Johnson wasted little time in making his presence known in the pro ranks. Originally scheduled to begin his pro career at Medford, OR, he was quickly diverted to Salt Lake City to pitch for a team that would finish deep in the cellar in the Pioneer League.

And what a pro debut it was for Johnson! Jim made his pro appearance in relief for Salt Lake City vs the Tommy Lasorda managed Ogden Dodgers. He retired all 11 Ogden batters he faced in order while striking out 7. 42

In his next outing Jim “pitched a masterful 4 hit gem” as described by sportswriter Norm Shey in the Deseret News. Jim hurled a complete game and struck out 13 against Idaho Falls, leaving his ERA at a spectacular 0.82. Showing he hadn’t lost his touch as a hitter from his college days, he aided his own cause with a perfect 3-3 at the plate. 43

Jim next took the mound on July 10 and came on in relief late in the game to help his team snap a long losing streak. Jim pitched the last 3 innings in a 13-inning affair to win his second game in his short tenure for Salt Lake City. 16 games into the season, Johnson was the winner in 2 of the 5 Giants wins.

The lowly Chiefs lost their 18th game of the season on July 20 against but 7 wins, but through no fault of Johnson. Jim was coasting to what appeared to be a comfortable victory with a 5-0 lead after 7 innings of work, only to see 4 Salt Lake relief pitchers give up 5 runs in the 8th inning as the team would eventually lose 6-5. 44

In was de ja vu in his next outing against front running Ogden. Johnson was coasting along with a commanding 6-0 leading with 10 punch outs against Lasorda’s Dodgers. After tiring in the 8th, Johnson was relieved with a 6-2 lead. However, much to the chagrin of the Family Night Crowd of 2300 fans, the bullpen again imploded and gave up seven 9th inning runs as the lowly Chiefs dropped their 20th game in 31 outings. 45

Pitching stats posted in The Sporting News showed Johnson leading all pitchers in the Pioneer League with a 3-1 mark with a remarkable low ERA of 0.75.

Following his last mound appearance on July 26th Johnson got a call to advance up to Fresno for the final month of the 1967 season. Jim would exit Salt Lake City not only leading his team in wins and ERA, but his .389 batting average was also tops on the team in hitting.

“School teacher Jim Johnson recorded an E for effort and an A for achievement in his Fresno GIANTS California League pitching debut” wrote Bruce Farris in the Fresno Bee following Johnson’s 4-3 win over league leading Santa Barbara on August 2, 1967. After a rocky start in the first inning when the visitors tallied all of their runs, Johnson settled down to shut out his opponent over the next 8 innings in a complete game victory. 46

After a season that began in the early spring, Jim Johnson’s long season as a pitcher came to an end just as it started — with a win. In a 7-5 victory over Lodi Jim gave up 3 earned runs in 6 2/3 innings pitched to post a perfect 2-0 season during his short stint in Fresno.

However, it would not be the last time Johnson would take the field for Fresno. As mentioned before, Johnson was serious about helping the team in any way possible, as such Fresno manager Dave Garcia would use Johnson as an outfielder before he was granted an early leave to return home to begin his off-season job as a schoolteacher. 47

Unlike many minor leaguers who would partake in spring training before reporting to their assigned teams in organized ball, this did not hold true for Johnson. On the same day that the 1967-68 school year drew to a close on Friday, June 7, 1968, Johnson would marry his childhood sweetheart, Mary Ruth Wagner later that evening. No exotic honeymoon travels were on the dockets for the new Mr. and Mrs. Johnson as they departed for Decatur, Illinois shortly after the wedding.

After beginning his rookie season in pro ball with two teams who landed near, or at the bottom, of their respective leagues, such was not the case for Johnson’s next move up the ladder with Decatur of the Midwest League.

Jim was first thrust into action on July 19 at Clinton and quickly displayed his fitness by pitching a complete game victory. After an understandably off-season of rust caused by focusing on school teachings, Johnson allowed a pair of 1st innings runs before then hurling 6 complete shutout innings to notch his first win in Mid-West League action. 49

In his next start on June 25, Jim again went the distance against Wisconsin Rapids but was tagged with a 2-1 loss with only one of his runs allowed earned. 50

After virtually using the entire month of July as his personal spring training where his win-lost record stood at 2-4, Johnson then began a hot streak in August to completely reverse the tables. In the first of his 5 consecutive victories to close out the season, Jim pitched a complete game 8-0 shutout in the second game of a double header at Dubuque. 51

Jim quickly evened up his record at 4-4 with a 5-hit gem in a 4-1 win over Cedar Rapids. Before the season game to a close for the Decatur regular season champions, Jim had posted 3 more victories. 52

Decatur moved a step closer to a Midwest League baseball pennant as Johnson pitched a 6-hitter in a 2-1 victory over Waterloo. Despite the heat and humidity Jim got stronger as the game went along. He struck out 2 batters each in the 7th and 8th inning and then capped it off by fanning 3 batters in the ninth. 53

In his final start to wrap up the season for the league leading Decatur Commodores, Jim hiked his final regular season record to 6-4. After a shaky start in the first inning Johnson found his pitching groove and at one span retired 14 men in a row while striking out 9. As usual, he also helped his team at the plate as he had a pair of hits and 3 rbi in a 7-3 win over runner-up Quad City. 54

His final appearance in a Commodore uniform just might have been his best. In a best 2 of 3 game series to decide the playoff championship, Johnson won a 7-1 decision over Quad City to tie up the playoff series at 1-1. He allowed 6 hits and struck out 8 while also going 1-3 at the plate. 55

Although Decatur won the regular season crown, Johnson’s victory in the second game would prove to be the only win for his team in the best 2 of 3 playoffs as Quad City won the deciding game 3-1 to capture the playoff title. Six Decatur players would make it to the Big Leagues (Don Corrithers, Greg Garrett, Jim Howarth, Dave Sells, Roe Skidmore and Johnson.) Skidmore, a fan favorite of the Commodores was a hometown player who was born and raised in Decatur. Skidmore would also have the distinction of the briefest of appearances in the Big Show. Roe had one at bat for the Chicago Cubs on Sep 17, 1970 and he would be one of those rare players who could boast of a perfect 1.000 batting average as he singled off Jerry Reuss.

Including the playoffs, Jim would finish with an impressive ERA of 2.06 with 97 strikeouts before packing his bags and heading back home to Muskegon, Michigan to return to his job as a schoolteacher.

After missing spring training in his first season of pro ball, Johnson did report for spring training with the Giants organization in 1969 and was promoted to Amarillo of the Texas League.

The early work in spring training made for huge dividends for the recently married Johnson. Jim started with a perfect 4-0 record for Amarillo. In one effort he struck out 10 in a complete game 6-1 win over Arkansas. He only walked 1 batter and that would be the only run allowed as the lefthanded workhorse threw 128 pitches in the victory.56

Jim’s 4 game winning streak was snapped by El Paso while seeking his 5th win, but he was a part of some histrionics. El Paso’s Bobby Trevino was hoping to break a 46-year-old Texas League hitting streak, but was stymied by Johnson and his replacement Ron Lea. In his previous game Trevino had tied the record first set by Ike Boone at 37 before being shut out by Johnson and Lea. 57

Johnson quickly bounced back in his next outing with a complete game 11-1 victory over Albuquerque with his only run allowed on a fielder’s choice rbi from future 1980 National League batting champion Bill Buckner. 58

Johnson’s next victory was again against these same Albuquerque Dodgers. Although he had his strike out pitch working with 8 punch outs, Jim was uncharacteristically wild in the thin New Mexico air as he walked 8 batters. However, he managed to scatter 5 Dodger hits in his 5-3 victory, 2 of the hits coming off the bat of Buckner. 59

With a 7-2 record and a low ERA that ranked in the top 5 in the Texas League, Johnson was called up to AAA Phoenix in Mid-June of 1969. Johnson debuted with Phoenix on June 20 and fared well in his first start, exiting the game vs. Spokane in the 6th inning with the score tied at 3-3.

Johnson would primarily pitch in mop up relief roles until manager Charlie Fox inserted him as a starter on July 29th vs. Hawaii. Jim pitched 7 shut-out innings and was leading 1-0 before being relieved in the 8th. Hawaii then scored 3 runs over the final 2 frames to deprive Jim of his first PSL victory in a 3-1 loss. 60

His first victory in PCL action came in his next start on August 6 when he pitched his Giants to a complete game 5-2 victory in a road win against Vancouver. And just as he had accomplished in all his stops since he was in Little League, Johnson showed he could hit as well as pitch. Jim stroked three hits in 4 trips to the plate against four Vancouver pitchers.

In a feature story on the game, Johnson was quoted: “I always enjoy hitting,” said Johnson modestly, “but he (field manager Charlie Fox) has got a lot of guys who are better hitters than I.”

In his two years in Phoenix, Johnson would post a batting average that would be the envy of any position player eyeing a trip to the Big Leagues as he would post a healthy .341 average during his tenure in Phoenix. 61

Johnson pitched much better than his 1-3 record during his first stint in Phoenix. Jim posted a 3.56 ERA before the Giant brass OK’d Jim’s early departure from the club so he could pursue a Masters Degree at Michigan State University. Although the folks in the front office in San Francisco were ok with Jim’s pursuit of Grad School, it’s all too likely it was not greeted with as much enthusiasm from Charlie Fox.

Following his off-season pursuit of his graduate degree in college, a rarity for the old-school players of yesteryear, Johnson in early March would join the San Francisco Giants at their training site in Scottsdale, Arizona. Johnson would quickly earn an initial positive impression from Giants manager Clyde King.

In his spring training debut with the big club he gave up but one run and 1 hit in 3 innings of work against Cleveland on March 6, 1970. “He threw hard, his breaking stuff was good, and he got the ball over the plate,” said King. “If he hadn’t walked the leadoff batter in the eighth, they wouldn’t have scored on him. I was impressed with his poise,” added King. 62

Jim’s next appearance found him tossing 2 shutout innings with only 1 walk allowed. From there it was on to the Orient where the Giants had been scheduled to play a series of games against a few select teams from the Japan major leagues. It would be the first, and perhaps the last time, a major league team would depart their spring training home base for a foreign destination

The trip in all likelihood set the Giants well back in their preparations for the upcoming season. Batting practice in Japan constituted a limited 15 minutes for the 27 position players who traveled. The pitchers were not allowed to run in the outfield and temperatures hovered well below 50 degrees for most games. The disgruntled Giants also played poorly as they finished their series across the Pacific with a lackluster 3-6 record. Hall of Famer Willie McCovey was suffering from an eye ailment and using better discretion should have remained in Arizona. However, since McCovey, along with Willie Mays and Juan Marichal was deemed a big gate attraction in Japan, he made the long jaunt but saw limited action. 63

Johnson worked in one game on the tour. He came on in relief of his roommate Gaylord Perry to pitch 2 scoreless innings while allowing but 1 hit. On the return home a number of the rookies were demoted to their minor league facility, but not Johnson as he remained with the main club. 64

The southpaw hurled a couple of innings in the Giants last spring training game against Atlanta after getting the good news that he would be a Big Leaguer. Jim gave up a run and 2 hits to make his final spring training line read 9 innings pitched with 2 runs scored and 4 hits for an impressive showing of a 2.00 ERA. At 24 years of age, with a degree in mathematics in college and one semester shy of earning his Masters degree, Jim Johnson was in the Big Show.

Johnson would finally make his big-league debut on April 13th in the Giants 8th game of the season. A crowd of more than 37,000 fans were on hand at Atlanta’s Fulton County Stadium for the home opener of the Atlanta Braves. Jim was called on to replace Giant’s starter Frank Reberger in the very first inning after Reberger was touched up for 3 runs.

There were runners at first and third when Johnson made the nervous walk from the Giants bull pen. Jim retired both batters he faced to end the first inning and then followed up with 2 scoreless innings before returning to the mound in the fourth.

It appeared that Jim was heading for another spotless inning after retiring two of the first three batters he faced in the fourth before the Braves bats came alive. Before Jim was relieved by Ron Bryant, the Braves had roughed up Johnson for 4 hits, and a walk with the deciding blow a 2-run triple from Tony Gonzalez. 65

After patiently watching from the Giant’s bullpen for 8 games before he was again called upon by manager Clyde King, only 3 days had passed before Jim was inserted into his next game in Houston. Jim entered at the top of the 4th inning with the Giants trailing Houston 5-3 in the Astrodome. The first batter he would face would be a fellow Western Michigan alumnus Jim Bouton, who became the first strikeout victim in Johnson’s all too brief MLB career.

Jim would then walk Joe Morgan, and while the speedy Morgan was on the base paths, Johnson was called for a balk, much to the dismay of Johnson’s road roommate, Hall of Fame pitcher Gaylord Perry. Perry argued so vociferously from the Giant dugout in defense of his new pal that he was ejected from the game. The balk would prove costly for Johnson because, after a Joe Pepitone groundout moved Morgan to third, Jim uncorked a wild pitch that sent home Morgan. It was the only run allowed by Jim as he retired the Astros in order the following inning. Jim was lifted for a pinch hitter in the top of the sixth. The Giants would rally and send the game into extra innings where a 2-run homer by Willie McCovey gave the Giants a 11-9 victory. 66

It was then on to Cincinnati where on April 18, 1970, Jim would insert his name in the record books as a winning pitcher in a MLB game. Jim was credited with the victory, an improbable victory to be sure. Once again it was Reberger who Jim replaced in the Reds half of the fourth inning. When Jim arrived on the mound to take the ball from Giants manager Clyde King, he was not looking at a pretty scene. Three runners had already crossed the plate and the bases were full of Reds when Johnson was summoned from the bull pen.

To make matters even worse, Jim had inherited either a 2-0 or 3-0 count on the first batter he faced in Bobby Tolan. Jim proceeded to walk Tolan, but by rule, the walk was credited to Reberger. Playing in front of a crowd that included his in-laws from his hometown of Muskegon, Michigan, Johnson then uncorked a wild pitch that scored Pete Rose. Before the dust had settled and Jim had retired Lee May for the final out of the inning, the Reds had 7 runs cross the plate, giving Cincinnati a commanding 8-3 lead. None of the runs were charged to Johnson, but all the runs were credited to the very unlucky Reberger.

Jim had an efficient 5th inning, retiring the side with only one walk allowed as the Giants came to the plate for what would prove to be a memorable moment for Jim Johnson. Cincinnati pitcher Ray Washburn couldn’t find the plate and walked the first 4 batters he faced in the Giants half of the sixth inning. Tony Cloninger replaced Washburn and had seemingly got the Reds out of trouble with a made-to-order 1-2-3 double play.

Bob Heise kept the now 2-out rally going with a 2 run single to narrow the gap to 8-6. Jim’s day was done when Steve Whitaker, batting for Johnson, and Bobby Bonds both walked bringing Ron Hunt up to the plate with the bases loaded. Hunt made Johnson a winner with a grand slam to give the Giants a 10-8 lead, a lead they would not relinquish as 1967 NL CY Young winner Mike McCormick pitched the final 4 innings and allowed only one run.

Even though he was the winning pitcher with no earned runs allowed, it would prove to be the last game Jim would pitch in the major leagues. Jim shortly thereafter was sent to Phoenix to pitch for his ‘old friend’ Charley Fox.

Perhaps still seething over Jim’s early departure to pursue a graduate degree in the latter stages of the 1969 season, Fox seldom called upon Johnson before Fox left Phoenix to replace Clyde King on May 28th as the Giants manager.

Jim was finally released from purgatory by new Phoenix manager Hank Sauer when he combined with Bill Faul to allow but 3 hits in 7 innings in the second game of a doubleheader sweep of Salt Lake City on June 5th

After pitching in but 15 innings following his departure from San Francisco, Jim got the starting assignment for the first time in over a year on June 23. Jim responded in a sparkling way by pitching Phoenix to a complete game 2-hit victory over Tacoma, allowing but 5 hits, no walks while striking out 10, which had to prompt local fans to inquire as to why was he languishing on the bench?

Giant’s manager Hank Sauer said of Johnson’s outing: “He was something else out there. All he needed was a shot and he certainly earned a spot in the starting rotation.” 69

True to his word, Sauer started Johnson just 4 days later. He pitched 6 2/3 innings before tiring in a 5-4 win over a Spokane team loaded with future MLB stars, including Steve Garvey, Bill Buckner, and the 1970 PCL MVP winner Bobby Valentine.

Jim went the distance for the second time in three starts in a 4-3 win over Tucson on July 3, spacing out 7 hits, all singles, walking just two, and striking out 6. All runs charged to Jim were unearned.

He had more on his mind than trying to tame Tacoma in his next outing. “I was nervous in the first inning,” said Johnson, who missed three walks, permitted one hit and allowed a run in the first frame. “My wife is due to have our first baby any time now, and I couldn’t keep my mind on the game for the first few minutes. Once I settled down, I was OK.”

He was more than OK, however, as he pitched hitless ball for the next 6 innings before giving way to the bullpen on another hot and muggy night in Phoenix. It was Jim’s fourth victory in five decisions, and third without a loss, since inserted into the starting rotation. 70

The next game for the still expectant father was a nightmarish outing by the Phoenix defense. The Giants committed 5 errors in a long third inning with only 1 of the 5 runs scored by Spokane earned. Jim took one for the team and stayed out on the mound until the 8th inning in a loss to Spokane.

Jim had a rocky start in his next outing but got little help from the very short left field fence in Portland. With the score tied at 2-2 in the fifth inning, and with his opposing pitcher Ray Peters at the plate with the bases loaded, Peters lifted a routine fly ball to left field that sailed just over the fence at the 308 foot mark to spell doom for Johnson and the Giants.

Jim was scheduled to pitch one game of a scheduled double header at Tucson on July 28 but was removed from the start due to what was described in the Arizona Republic issue on July 29th as a ‘stiff arm.’ 71

A very nervous Johnson was slightly more than 100 miles from Phoenix when his son Jimmy was born on July 30th. Rules in organized ball from this era allowed no time off for expectant fathers. After the Phoenix club returned home on Aug 1st, Johnson, stiff arm and all, was thrust into action in a 1-0 game with Hawaii and he responded with a shut-out inning.

Jim would pick up the win in what would prove to be his penultimate outing in his professional career, just 9 days after becoming a father for the first time. 7600 fans looked on in Honolulu as Jim gutted out 6 and two-third innings before getting some much-needed relief work from Bill Faul to preserve a 2-1 win over the PCL leaders. Jim could only blame himself for the only run scored by the Islanders as the run scored on a wild pitch from Jim. When asked by Arizona Republic sportswriter Bob Eger about his sore arm of late, Johnson replied: “It still hurts. I noticed the pain more on breaking balls then on the fast balls, but it’s not bad enough to keep me from pitching. I have all winter to rest it.” 72

It was clear at that point in time, when one looks at the above quote, that there was no hint of an early retirement for Johnson.

Jim Johnson’s final game as a professional baseball player took place many thousands of miles from his Muskegon, Michigan home. On August 14, pitching with a lame arm for a depleted Phoenix pitching staff, Jim gave up 4 runs on 6 hits but struck out 8 in a 4-2 loss in Hawaii. Following the Friday night conclusion in the 7-game series, the team would have little time to rest as they would board a plane for a long trip across much of the Pacific to begin a series in Salt Lake City the next night. One can only speculate what was going through Jim’s mind during the long flight. 73

According to the Arizona Republic Jim was slated to start on August 19th. However, with scarcely one week left in the regular season there was no point in sending out the promising young southpaw with a chance to incur further damage to his sore arm.

Jim and his family, that now included a toddler of less than two months, returned to Michigan where Jim completed his Masters Degree from Michigan State University. With a number of months to consider his future before returning to the Giants Spring Training site in early 1971, Johnson spent many hours contemplating his next move. Should he continue his career while still in the prime of his career, or pursue another long-term goal of a career in education?

Johnson loved the game of baseball but was not enamored with the travels, nor the off the field life of a baseball player while on the road. Jim was especially upset when he was on the road with his Phoenix team when his wife gave birth to their first son, an edict that has since seen a much-needed correction in today’s era.

The front office in San Francisco had to be more than surprised when Johnson notified management that he was retiring from the pro ranks to begin a career in education. And what a career it was in his next profession!

Instead of heading for the bright lights of San Francisco, the Johnson family instead left for a tiny remote town in Central Michigan where Jim served both as a schoolteacher and principle while his wife Mary taught sixth grade in Evart, Michigan.

Over the ensuing years Johnson would take on similar administrative positions at Kent City, (MI) High and South Haven (MI) High. In 1983, well before he even reached the young age of 40, Jim reached the pinnacle of his educational career by returning to his hometown of Muskegon to become Superintendent of Schools at North Muskegon High.

Although he had retired from the game, Jim never lost his love for the game of baseball. However, his extensive duties in education limited his active baseball participation.

Jim would often take his family a couple of hours southwest to take in games at Comiskey Park. There was one game that will forever be etched in the minds of the young Johnson boys. On August 1, 1979, Jim and his family were situated down the right field line for a White Sox-Yankee contest. During the contest Jim’s two boys, Jim & Joel, were fortunate to land a souvenir baseball that was fouled into the seats. Little did they know at the time, that one of the two players who joined their father as a unanimous selection to the 1967 Mid-American All-Conference team, would be playing his last major league contest. It was the following day that Yankee star catcher Thurman Munson perished in his private plane while practicing solo takeoffs and landings on his day off.

There were a few fond remembrances when Jim would briefly return to the diamond that should be shared.

Jim would go back to Western Michigan frequently and play in the university’s annual old-timers-varsity exhibition game in late fall. There was one occasion when he brought to the WMU game his son Jimmy, who was in grade school at this time. Here is what the youngster clearly remembered about that encounter:

“It was interesting – because he was the most popular of all the guys there,” recalled his son Jim, now a successful executive with a major corporation in Jacksonville, Florida. “Everyone wanted to talk to him – old timers and the current players and coaches. I found that odd?

I remember Mike Squires being at one of the games and at the time he was a starter with the White Sox, and I wondered why they didn’t want to talk to him (Squires) more. I actually asked Mr. Squires this question and he said: “**because your dad was the best to play here**.”

One man who idolized Johnson as a youngster back in Muskegon was Walt Gawkowski, the current manager of the Muskegon Clippers, a summer baseball team comprised of college players in the Great Lakes Summer League.

“I remember watching him throw an inning at Marsh Field for the Grand Rapids Sullivans right after he left pro ball. He struck out the first two hitters on six pitches – all fastballs. He went 0-2 on the third hitter that inning before he fouled off a pitch. Then Jim struck him out looking on a breaking ball – all strikes and three strikeouts.”

Young Jim remembered his father as rarely talking about his baseball accomplishments. “When I was a little older and just entering high school, my dad was asked by Walt Gawkowski if he would play for his City League team one game as his team was short of players. My dad was probably 36 or 37… right before he got sick …. and to my knowledge had not lifted a bat competitively in years and definitely had not pitched.

Well, he did both that night.

I remember for the first time in my life I really understood that my dad could ‘really play’. He pitched/threw strikes/threw hard/dominated in the couple innings he pitched. He went 3 for 3 at the plate and they were just BB’s up the middle. He stole bases and looked fast.

After the game we went home, had dinner, did the dishes, homework, never discussed the game. That was how he was… he just wanted to be Jim Johnson the father/husband/Superintendent. But I got clues every now and then that he was that ‘plus’, a pretty good ball player. I always respected that humility,” reflected a proud son.

It was shortly thereafter that Johnson received the fateful news that he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Fully aware that his days were numbered Jim wanted one final bonding with his two boys and the great game of baseball.

Jim and his sons, Jimmy and Joel, began a journey that would take them across the upper midwest and the east coast. Son Jim was still a bit shy of 16 years of age and without a driver’s license. “I did all the driving because he thought I needed the work’, recalled Jimmy.

“We almost exclusively stayed in a tent! We went to all kinds of parks…we saw the Tigers/Toledo/Cleveland/Oneonta. We went to Cooperstown/went into Canada/upper New York/Philly/Pittsburgh/spots in Ohio. We got to see all kinds of ballparks. This was before minor league baseball was ‘cool’ and now have these fancy new ball parks.

I’ll never forget it… I became a better driver and we got to spend some really good time with my father who was sick and sad. It is another example of baseball and family bringing sunshine to an otherwise cloudy day.”

Jim Johnson passed away on December 6, 1987 at the much too young age of 42. Shortly thereafter the baseball field at North Muskegon High was renamed: James B. Johnson Baseball Field. He was inducted into the Greater Muskegon Hall of Fame in 1992 where his acceptance speech was eloquently given by his son Jimmy. Western Michigan University also honored Jim into their Athletic Hall of Fame in 1997.

Jim Johnson, who would retire from baseball well before his prime with a 1-0 record, would bat a thousand as a great teammate, father, husband and educator, and one well remembered and respected by this author.

NOTES: 1. Verified by John Winchell, Curator University Archives, Western Michigan University.

2: From Johnson scrapbook, Muskegon Chronicle ‘Can’t Miss’ Tag Pinned on Jimmy Johnson” story written by Mart Tardani.

3: Johnson Scrapbook, Muskegon Chronicle

4: From Johnson Scrapbook, Muskegon Chronicle: “Johnson Gives One Hit in Win”

5: Johnson Scrapbook, Muskegon Chronicle: “Wins 1-0 over Kiwanis Nine”

6: Johnson Scrapbook (See Note 2)

7: Johnson Scrapbook, Muskegon Chronicle: “Zephyr Gas Wins Opening Game in State Mack Meet”

8. Johnson Scrapbook (See Note 2)

9: Johnson Scrapbook (See Note 2)

10: Muskegon Chronicle: “Big Reds Win North Playoff”

11: Muskegon Chronicle: “Two Muskegon Hurlers Combine for No-Hitter”

12: Muskegon Chronicle: “Reds Crush Rockets 14-3”

13: Muskegon Chronicle: “Big Reds Champs in Baseball”

14: Muskegon Chronicle: “Win Streak of Pepsi Ends at 32”

15: Muskegon Chronicle: “Muskegon Hunbles Ionia 8-1”

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17: The Western Herald, Oct 20, 1964

18: Sportitorial – Kalamazoo Gazette: “Muskegon Southpaw Helped Keep Western in Baseball Limelight” Kalamazoo Gazette: “Johnson Hurles 2-Hitter; Broncs Beat State 3-1

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20: Kalamazoo Gazette, May 5, 1965: Western Ends Michigans 10-Game Winning Streak”

21: Muskegon Chronicle: “Johnson Fans 14 in 8-0 Win**”**

22: Muskegon Chronicle from Johnson Scrapbook

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37: Kalamazoo Gazette: “Bronco ‘9’ Wins, Jim Johnson Pitchers Two-Hitter as WMU Halts Bowling Green 3-1”

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