**'Knucksie' helped comedian along an unfunny road**

**Lohmann: It's been a long, not-always-funny road for comedian Brett Leake, but he had 'Knucksie' to help him along the way**

**BY BILL LOHMANN**

When news arrived the other week of the death of Hall of Fame knuckleball pitcher Phil Niekro, I thought immediately of one of his biggest fans, comedian Brett Leake, who had very personal reasons to admire Niekro's good nature and unconventional path to greatness.

Leake, 61, was diagnosed with a form of muscular dystrophy as a teen, yet he has forged an almost 40-year career in stand-up comedy (though he eventually became, as he describes himself, a "sit-down, stand-up comedian"), He made appearances on NBC's "The Tonight Show" when Jay Leno was the host, and performed at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Wolf Trap, among many, many places over the years.

As the progressive neuromuscular disease continues to weaken his body, he has evolved into a "motivational comedian," entertaining corporate and civic audiences with "clean" comedy from his power chair. What hasn't changed are his sense of humor, his comedic timing and his philosophical approach to life - all the while drawing inspiration from Niekro.

Niekro, who died Dec. 26 at age 81, was a sort of Everyman ballplayer who pitched 24 seasons in the big leagues, mostly with the Atlanta Braves, until age 48. He won 318 games, the most by a knuckleball pitcher. His nickname was Knucksie.

Leake's connection to him is somewhat difficult to explain - it's a little about baseball and a lot about life - so I asked Leake to share the context.

I reached him last week at his home in Louisa County, where he has been hunkered down during the pandemic. His 2020 professional life was pretty much a washout as all of his scheduled gigs evaporated.

"The last time I told a joke for money was in March," he said, "and the last time I got a laugh was February."

The last part can't possibly be true, but, if it is, I broke the streak right then.

During an interview for a 2013 story, Leake mentioned that Niekro was his baseball hero and a role model. He then told me a couple of stories about meeting him a half-dozen times after games in Atlanta and at Richmond's old Parker Field in the 1970s and 1980s.

Each time, Niekro remembered Leake and his brother and friends - and their homemade "Phil" sign. He got out of his car as he was leaving Atlanta's Fulton County Stadium when he saw them and their sign. Made his way over to them. Made small talk. Asked them how things were in Richmond. Signed the poster, "You guys are the best." (He meant it; Leake and his buddies saw him pitch five times over the years, and he won all five games.)

They even called Atlanta in October 1982 to wish Niekro well in the upcoming playoffs. Who does that? Guys just out of college. They called information - remember those days? - and learned his was an unlisted number. Oh well, they told the operator, they were big fans, sometimes drove to Atlanta to see him and had never seen him lose, and they sure had hoped they could wish him luck.

The operator took pity and offered to call the Niekros and give them the number so they could call back if they want. (This was clearly another time in history.) Ten minutes later, the phone rang; it was Niekro's wife, Nancy. Phil was out fishing, she said, but he would call them when he returned home.

"My buddy and I are sitting there, going, there's no way," says Leake, remembering that long-ago afternoon.

A half-hour or so later, the phone rang again.

"Hello, this is Phil. How you guys doing?"

Unreal.

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But there was much more to Leake's connection to Niekro than a few gracious encounters, and it all started with the knuckleball, a most curious pitch that few professionals throw (with any success). The knuckleball is thrown with a stiff wrist and without spin (gripped with the fingertips and nails but not the knuckles) and almost shot-putted to the plate.

Thrown correctly, the ball dances unpredictably and can be almost impossible to hit by batters (and almost impossible to catch by catchers, who often wear extra-large mitts to help their cause). Thrown incorrectly with a spin or too much speed (or if weather conditions are not just right), the ball doesn't move much at all - and batters can tee off as if sizing up a beach ball.

There is a fine line between it being thrown correctly and incorrectly, and even the best practitioners of the art - and Niekro was among the best - don't really know where the ball is going when they let it go. As with any knuckleballer, Niekro was no stranger to rough days.

The knuckleball is a novelty, and knuckleballers often are, too. They also often come across as more human than other players as the knuckleball is thrown at a modest speed that most of us can relate to more than the flaming 100-mph fastballs fired by pitchers usually considered the most elite.

Leake grew up a baseball fan, and when he and his brother, Derek, were still children, their father, Francis, showed them how to throw a knuckleball, a pitch he told them "you can count the stitches on."

Leake became aware of Niekro and his knuckleball right around the time he was diagnosed with facioscapulohumeral muscular dystrophy. The timing was most serendipitous .

It was 1975, and Leake was a 10th-grader at Henrico High. As a child, he ran and jumped like his friends, but by adolescence he was losing strength, a development not totally unexpected considering his father, grandmother and several of his uncles had the disease. Still, the news was heartbreaking.

During my 2013 visit, Leake showed me his journal entry the day a doctor delivered his diagnosis: "The first question I asked was, 'Can I do anything about it?' and when he answered, no, I choked up, and my eyes filled with water."

Then some of his focus went to ... Phil Niekro.

He found parallels - and a life lesson - in learning about a successful ballplayer who put his faith in an unpredictable pitch that his coal-miner father had taught him and that he mastered, as much as a knuckleball could be mastered.

"Phil Niekro's command over his knuckleball signaled to me - someone living with a progressive disease and its charted course - one could learn to exercise at least some control over the uncontrollable," Leake says.

The diagnosis left him in a dark place, and yet ...

"Something happened in my mind that made me look outward, not inward," he said. "Inward was some sadness, outward were my friends, people who wanted to do things: go to the football game, go to the basketball game, go to the dance. At the same time, among the things my friends shared back then was interest in this guy, Phil Niekro."

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Over the years, Leake would draw comfort and inspiration from what appeared to be this strange convergence of his life and Niekro's career. Besides the occasional encounters, Leake clipped newspapers and kept a scrapbook on Niekro. On Niekro pitching days, he tuned into long-distance AM radio stations after dark, hoping Niekro was still in the game when reception grew strong enough to hear.

In 1981, he and his buddies ran Niekro in a mock election at William &amp; Mary in the Virginia governor's race. (He ran a strong third among non-Virginia voters on campus.)

In 1982, the year of Niekro's return to the playoffs, Richmond's first comedy club opened. The next February, Leake performed his first gig at an open-mic night at the Richmond Comedy Club. On a night in 1985 when Niekro went for his 300th victory, Leake, who was emceeing at a comedy club in Raleigh, worked it out with the headliner - a baseball fan - to stay on stage long enough so Leake could go out to his car when the signal from the New York station came in. (Niekro was a Yankee at this point.) He crossed paths again with Niekro in 1991, the year the knuckleballer managed the Richmond Braves and Leake was invited to perform on "The Tonight Show."

In 1997, Leake arranged his comedy touring schedule so he could be in Cooperstown, N.Y., to attend Niekro's induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

In recent years, Leake kept up with Niekro by Googling his name to see what he was up to: throwing out first pitches, attending Chamber of Commerce-type events. He was unaware Niekro had been diagnosed with cancer, so the news of his death hit sudden and hard.

"I had a pretty tough day," he said. "Had a big sob."

He teared up again as he talked about a guy he barely knew, in many respects, but felt he knew so well.

"I can't believe how lucky I was ... that I discovered this guy at such a critical moment in my life."

As he looks forward, Leake cannot help but see a difficult path, as his disease continues its unrelenting march, his body destined to grow weaker along the way. His father died at 82. His uncles who had the disease passed in their 60s. Two cousins are already gone.

It's a future he could reasonably view as bleak, but he prefers to look at it this way: He will manage as best he can, hope things go right more than they go wrong, and make something out of nothing if he must. Much like a knuckleball pitcher.

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