

INDUCTEE PROFILE

Short blaze of glory

Elbow injury interrupts Blazier's tenure with Phillies

By Neil Rudel
Altoona Mirror

The Major League Baseball Draft is such an inexact science that 50-plus rounds go by, and still players are left to sign as free agents.

Ron Blazier was one of them. The big righthander from Bellwood-Antis was identified by former Altoona Area High School baseball coach Jay Perry, who served as a central Pennsylvania scout for the Philadelphia Phillies.

"Ronny was a longshot," Perry said. "But he was throwing really hard in high school, close to 90, and eventually, he got up to 92-94."

So Perry tipped off Ken Hultzapple, the Phils' regional scouting supervisor. Hultzapple liked Blazier's height (6-foot-6) that would grow into a 240-pound frame, his poise and his potential, and signed him following his senior year at B-A in 1989.

"He was a big, strong, green kid who had a good arm and was a competitor," he said. "He had a lot of improvement to do. He was coachable, and he listened well and did what they told him. His control was good, and it got better every year."

Through Princeton, W. Va., Batavia, N.Y., Spartanburg, S.C. and Clearwater, Blazier steadily ascended through the Phils' organization, improving at each stop. He was asked to switch from starter to reliever.

"I said I'll do whatever -- if it gets me there (to the big leagues) quicker, I'll do it," Blazier said. "It seemed like it clicked right from the beginning. If you had a bad game as a reliever, you got right back in there the next day instead of having to wait a week."

He helped Double-A Reading



Ron loosens up before a game against the Pirates at Three Rivers Stadium.

win an Eastern League title in 1995. The R-Phils' assistant general manager at the time? None other than Curve GM Todd Parnell.

"Blaze played a big role for us in Reading," Parney said. "Great arm out of the pen, big presence on the mound. He had great relationships with the team and front office. He used to come over to our house for picnics after Sunday games. I'm very proud of him."

Shortly thereafter, Blazier won

the Paul Owens Award as the pitcher of the year in the Phils' organization. He continued his climb through Triple-A Scranton before his dream culminated, at age 24, with a May 1996 summoning to Veterans Stadium.

He remembers having to pinch himself in the Phils' bullpen.

"You're used to playing in front of 1,000, 2,000, maybe 5,000 and then to go and in front of 60,000 ... my first game, I was just looking



Ron (center, back row) helped pitch Bellwood to the PIAA Class AA title game in 1989.

around the bullpen in awe," he said. "Once I got the first game under my belt, it wasn't as bad."

Blazier made an immediate impact with the Phils. His fastball was up to 96, and he posted a 1.80 earned run average over his first 10 appearances and, after one win, his picture appeared in the Philadelphia Daily News under the headline "Blazing!"

Blazier stuck with the Phillies for two seasons (1996-97) and wound up appearing in 63 games. He made the team out of spring training in 1998 but then began to experience elbow problems. He missed most of '98 and was sent to Venezuela for winter ball. Shortly thereafter, while pitching, he heard "a loud pop."

"They wanted me to learn a forkball and work on all my pitches," he said. "I knew something was wrong."

His ligament was damaged, and he underwent Tommy John

surgery in California, beginning a 16-month rehab that unfortunately ended with his release from the Phillies during spring training of 2000. After signing with the Orioles, he was promoted to Double-A Bowie in the Eastern League, where his luck would continue to be cruel. With many of his family and friends on hand at Blair County Ballpark -- those who made bus trips to Philly and Pittsburgh in '96 and '97 -- Blazier only watched and watched and ...

"I pitched the day before we came to Altoona, and then I didn't pitch in the four games we played in Altoona -- and I had 200 people there," he said.

He was released at the end of the year.

"I wasn't throwing the ball as hard as I used to," he acknowledged.

Today, Blazier works in construction for L.S. Fiore. He has three boys (Ronny, 9, Andrew, 2 and Alex, six months) and is set to marry fiance Angel Brower. He resides in Bellwood, which he helped lead to the '89 PIAA title game.

"Ron had a lot of natural ability," Todd Guyer, who coached Blazier

in high school, said. "He was a great kid and got along well with everyone. It was exciting for me and exciting for the whole area to see a local kid go from not being drafted to getting to the big leagues. He would come back in the offseason and come in in the morning and throw. He was an asset to our program."

Blazier is the second Bellwood-Antis athlete, joining Steve Hatfield (Class of 1992) in the Hall of Fame. It's made him appreciate people like Guyer -- "he ran a tight ship," he said -- along with those who were instrumental.

"My parents took me all over the place, to games, practices, to all-star games and tryouts once I got older," he said. "My mom and dad (Barb and Ron) are the biggest influences on me, and my stepdad (Mark Kleinfelter) took over and helped me out."

He said the Hall of Fame honor "is a great accomplishment, but it hasn't sunk in yet."

Blazier said he doesn't watch much baseball on TV, in part because, "it's hard knowing if I didn't break my elbow, maybe I'd still be playing."

At the same time, he still enjoys and shakes his head at the notoriety that never fully goes away for a former professional athlete.

"People send me cards to sign, and I still get stuff in the mail," he said. "I wonder: How did they get my address?"



Blazier bio

Sport: Baseball
Hometown: Bellwood
High school: Bellwood-Antis
Hall of Fame achievement: Spent two years with the Philadelphia Phillies. (1996-97) as a relief pitcher.
Current residence: Bellwood