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RECREATION

Vooght was, without a doubt, one of the best pitchers

Once scouted by the Phillies and Dodgers, batters feared this Renfrew County southpaw when he was on the mound

By Danny Gallagher
Special to The Leader

Renfrew -- For decades, Jack Vooght spread fear among enemy batters throughout Ontario.

Whether it was the Intercountry Senior Baseball League, the South Renfrew Senior Baseball League, the North Renfrew Senior Baseball League or Ottawa's Interprovincial loop, the southpaw won many battles to become one of the greatest pitchers southern Ontario and Renfrew County has ever known.

For the last few years, though, Mr. Vooght has been waging his biggest battle. It's a battle he's not winning: Alzheimer's has taken a massive hold of him. He has some good days, some not so good.

The good thing is he still recognizes his wife Ilse and others, including me. She thinks he has suffered from the devastating grip of this cruel enigma for four years but she figures it might be even longer than that.

Mr. Vooght has some difficulty formulating his words and has difficulty talking. It's all part of the grip Alzheimer's has on people.

"It's very sad. He's a shadow of his former self," his sister, Valerie Sheffield, said. "If you pinch him, he has some recollection."

As Ilse and I chatted on the phone in advance of an in-person visit and interview, she asked Jack what he remembered about certain events during his baseball career.

"Whatever happened to that letter that Tommy Lasorda sent to you that your mother intercepted?" Ilse asked Jack.

"She destroyed it," Jack replied as I heard the conversation from the phone connection.

Yes, Mr. Vooght was so darn good that he attracted the attention of the Los Angeles *Dodgers* and Lasorda, who would later become the *Dodgers* manager and is currently a goodwill ambassador for the franchise at age 92.

"Lasorda knew there were good players in the Ottawa Valley," Mrs. Vooght said.

"Lasorda must have seen Jack pitch somewhere," his sister, Valerie said.

When I visited Jack and Ilse on July 29 at their Renfrew home, Mr. Vooght out of the blue mentioned to me about "pitching on the sidelines" for the *Dodgers* in Montreal. Memory served him right there.

"They wanted to showcase me. They wanted to catch me," he said.

The exact year? Nobody is quite sure. But imagine, Mr. Vooght had recollection of this event despite Alzheimer's. Somehow, sometimes, the brain's hard-drive spills out memories.

Mr. Vooght and right-hander Bun Shean of nearby Cobden, Renfrew-based *Dodgers* scout Corrie LeGris, a certified landscape technician, and his son, Murray LeGris, travelled to Montreal for that look-see Mr. Vooght mentioned.

Valerie Sheffield then said Lasorda sent an invitation to the Vooght household, requesting that he show up for a more official look at a *Dodgers* camp in the U.S., perhaps at the *Dodgers* spring-training base in Vero Beach, Florida.

"I was a little kid at the time," Valerie told me. "Jack wasn't aware of the letter. I remember that letter came. My mother was very upset. She didn't want Jack to go to the U.S. She didn't want him to be in that environment (baseball). So she didn't show him the letter. She didn't want him to go at the time. There were no salaries then and prestige didn't exist. She thought he

had a good steady job. "She didn't understand the ramifications of it. Holy doodle. It could have gone the other way."

The "other way", meaning Mr. Vooght could have pitched in the majors if he had been given an official tryout.

Scouted By Lasorda In the 1950s
During my research and armed with clippings Ilse Vooght gave me, I sensed that the *Dodgers'* interest in the lefty pitcher was probably in the late 1950s or the early 1960s. Lasorda pitched for the Montreal *Royals* from 1950-54 and then again from 1958-60. From 1961-65, Lasorda was officially a *Dodgers* scout.

Ilse thinks her husband was scouted by Lasorda during his time with Guelph in 1962-63. When I asked Mr. Vooght what the highlight of his career was, his memory failed him.

"Tough question," he replied. But his wife said in an email August 1, "The highlight of Jack's baseball career was when he was invited to go to Montreal while playing for Guelph to try out for Tommy Lasorda."

When I reached out to Lasorda through the *Dodgers* PR department, Lasorda passed word on that he couldn't remember Mr. Vooght. It's hard to blame Lasorda because he ran across many, many prospects back in the day.

Not only were the *Dodgers* interested in Mr. Vooght, so were the Philadelphia *Phillies*. Montreal-based *Phillies* scout Paul Duval sent a complimentary letter to Mr. Vooght. This letter wasn't intercepted by his mother. It was dated October 29, 1958 when Mr. Vooght was 20.

"Just a few words to let you know that you have been highly recommended to my attention and that the *Phillies* would probably be interested in your services for the future," Duval said in the letter. "In fact, Dick Sheasgreen, a good ballplayer around here and one of my best friends, told me a lot of good things about you."

In the letter, Mr. Duval told Mr. Vooght that "you had been offered a contract by some other organization." We can only surmise that the organization was the *Dodgers*.

"If such is the case Jack, I would only wish that you would give us a chance to look at you," Duval said. "You must not forget that the *Phillies* only have nine farm clubs and that they represent the quickest way to the majors for you. That's what you have to think about in the first place. That's also where the money is Jack ... in the majors."

"I would appreciate if you would tell me about your intentions of playing organized ball and for which team you will play next summer so that I could probably go down and take a good look at you. So until I hear from you, the very best to you Jack and keep in good shape, will you?"

Because Alzheimer's has robbed Mr. Vooght of some of his memory, he couldn't remember this letter from the *Phillies'* scout.

As for his time in the Intercountry league, which is regarded as Canada's finest adult baseball league, he was exceptional. In 1962, according to Intercountry statistician Herb Morrel, Mr. Vooght was 5-3 with an ERA of 2.88 as Guelph captured the regular-season pennant and in the playoffs, he was lights-out in the semi-finals when he pitched 29 innings and only gave up one earned run in winning three games against Kitchener-Waterloo.

The following season with Guelph, he was a hard-luck 4-6 but he carved out a nifty 2.07 ERA. Mr. Vooght, out



Jack and Ilse Vooght were married June 26, 1966 at St. Michael's Church in Douglas. They met on a blind date. They have two children, James and Paula.
Photo: Danny Gallagher

of the blue in our conversation, asked me, "ever heard of Jimmy Wilkes? He was a great Negro player."

I replied that yes, I knew of Wilkes. He was a superb player from the U.S., who enjoyed a 10-season career with the Brantford *Red Sox*, who won the Intercountry championship in the two years Mr. Vooght played for Guelph.

Mr. Vooght told me in our in-person chat that he was 16 when he began playing senior ball for Renfrew. That

River was a natural for him. At the very young age of 19, Mr. Vooght was voted the league's MVP in 1957 while playing for Deep River. How about that?

Played For Pembroke and Renfrew Same Year
In 1959, a strange thing happened. Mr. Vooght played that season for both Renfrew and Pembroke. Prior to the July 15th deadline for movement of players, he obtained his release from

his hometown *Red Sox* to play for Pembroke so he could be his brother's teammate.

His defection to Pembroke was really felt by Renfrew in the Eastern Ontario finals that took place in September. Mr. Vooght won all four games as Pembroke beat Renfrew in the best-of-seven series 4-2 with two games tied. In the clinching game on September 13, Mr. Vooght was a one-man show in a 12-6 win. He was the winning pitcher and led the way at the plate with a three-run homer, a double, two singles and five RBIs.

"I think Jack was definitely in my time the best baseball pitcher in the Ottawa Valley as far as I'm concerned," said John David, a teammate of Mr. Vooght's from 1958-65. "He was our ace, our main pitcher. His fastball had movement on it. His fastball was wicked and deceptive."

"He had a really nice, slow curve that would come in as a change-up really vicious on left-handed batters. His curve would move batters back from the box and then it would break over the plate. He had big arms and he was a very big, lanky guy. The ball would get by the batter before the batter knew it. His motion was so smooth it tricked a lot of people."

After his two-season stint in Guelph, Mr. Vooght pitched for Douglas in 1964 because Renfrew didn't field a team, Mr. Vooght's long-time teammate, Allan Stitt told me. It sure was a treat for Douglas fans to see one of the greatest pitchers in Ottawa Valley history perform in their own backyard. He helped Douglas win the South Renfrew league championship that year.

"He looked like a real pro," said Jim Welsh, a teammate of Mr. Vooght's that wonderful season.

When I asked Mr. Vooght what he remembered about 1964 in Douglas, he didn't reply by saying "Tough question." He instead said, "it's water under the bridge. I don't dwell on it."

What he really meant by that statement, I'm not sure. Was it a season he wanted to forget or was it a season he couldn't remember because of Alzheimer's?

And then for the remainder of his career after playing for Douglas, he toiled for either Renfrew or Pembroke.

Teaching Became His Career
When Mr. Vooght wasn't playing baseball, he was briefly a chartered accountant, a career choice that didn't sit good with him.

"He was about to take his accounting papers but he decided it wasn't for him because it was too impersonal. He was a sociable and personal guy," his sister said.

So he went to Ottawa Teachers College and became a teacher, his first assignment being at a one-room school in the "backwoods" in North Algona Township about 40 miles west of Renfrew. He then got a job teaching in Sudbury at Nickel District High School, leaving behind the *Red Sox* near the end of one season.

He came back home to teach at Our Lady of Fatima elementary school in Renfrew, becoming the first male teacher at the school that was staffed mainly by the Sisters of St. Joseph. One day, the nuns were thrilled when Mr. Vooght drove some of them around in his Chevrolet Malibu convertible.

Later, he taught for many years at his alma mater, Renfrew Collegiate Institute. He would soon become the head of the mathematics department at RCI and then the head honcho of the business department.

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Ottawa Valley legend battling the nasty effects of Alzheimer's

From Page 16

Mr. Vooght retired from RCI in 1994 and in the middle of our chat, he blurted out without me even broaching the subject that "Clair Seeley was my mentor."

Mr. Seeley, a man steeped in education himself and in running the Red Sox for decades, had been Mr. Vooght's confidante.

Mr. Vooght was born in Campbell's Bay, Quebec in 1938 but moved to Renfrew with his parents, Bert and Mona, when he was a young child. Bert and Mona raised four children: Bill, Jack, Valerie and Carrie.

I played with Mr. Vooght for four seasons from 1971-75 and he was one of the two best players I played with in Renfrew, the other star being Jerry Lepine, who turned 75 this year.

Back in 1965, 55 years ago this summer, Mr. Lepine played Class A pro ball in Bluefield, Virginia for the Baltimore Orioles farm team in the Appalachian league. Signed as a free agent, he pitched in 11 games, got roughed up by the opposition and was released by manager Jim Frey. In 21 innings of work, he walked 15 batters, gave up 16 earned runs while striking out an impressive 15.

Despite so-so results that season, Mr. Lepine at least can say he played pro ball. "You get hit right between the eyes," Mr. Lepine's teammate, Frank Tependino told me in general terms about a player getting released. "You're devastated. You're away from home for the first time."

Mr. Tependino, who spent some time in the majors with the Yankees, remembers Mr. Lepine: "The name sticks out. He was my height (5-foot 110), about the same size. I played outfield and first base and he was pitching. We were the best picks from our areas."

Close to 10 years after getting released, Mr. Lepine never forget about Baltimore, the team that signed him. Him and I, my brother Jim and Cliff McGrimmon, another teammate with the Red Sox, travelled to Baltimore for a weekend series

at old Memorial Stadium.

Mr. Vooght, as the story goes, started out doing most of his chores right-handed but that changed. When it came to baseball, he switched to throwing left. God help all those batters, who had to face the southpaw. My brother Jim and I, both left-handed hitters, never had to face him. We were teammates with him for many years along with our brother, Lawrence.

"Jack fell into a basement excavation as a kid and broke his right arm. He couldn't pitch with his right arm," his sister said. "He wanted to continue pitching so he threw left-handed."

In our conversation in Renfrew, Mr. Vooght out of the blue talked about that experience, breaking his arm. As we mentioned before, the mind can play strange games. Again, his memory served him best in this instance.

"There was a couple building a new home. It was a house behind the old arena in Renfrew. I was 6-7 years old," he recollected. And he somehow fell into the hole. Imagine, he has Alzheimer's but that memory from long ago was not lost.

A Great Pitcher
Seeing Mr. Vooght on the mound gave us other guys on the field great assurances that this game would likely end up in our favour. He was that dominant, especially against left-handed batters. Of course, Mr. Vooght was some hitter from the left side with a strong, smooth stroke.

"He was the best pitcher I saw from the left side," said former Pembroke, Douglas and Renfrew teammate John McEachen. "Jerry Lepine was the best right-hander. Jack was good in his younger days and good in his older days. Everyone (batters) was careful with his curveball. It came in and went down."

Added former teammate Bob Hopper, now 92, "He was a great pitcher. He had a change-up; it was like a screwball."

Said Mr. Stitt, "He was definitely a power pitcher, a big guy who took a big step off the mound and would

appear to be closer to you than he was. To left-handed batters like me, he seemed to be on top of you. He had a hooky, jerky type of motion. He came over the top, took a long stride and it was almost like he was right on top of you. If Jack was pitching, we did not need too many runs to win the game."

When Terry Fleurie, a talented pitcher and hitter himself, complained about a sore arm, Mr. Vooght introduced his Red Sox teammate to a liniment called Heil Oil. Mr. Vooght gave Mr. Fleurie some of the liniment to try and Mr. Fleurie was more than happy with the results.

"I later discovered it was an old German liniment made for treating leather and the only place I could purchase it was at the shoe store in Eganville," said Mr. Fleurie, who has been a Leader staff reporter for 20 years.

"Jack was the consummate professional. I don't think I ever saw him get mad. He loved talking about the sport and was a true pitcher in that he studied the hitters and knew how to set them up."

"Although he was in the later years of his career when I joined the team, he was still a major force on the mound for our team, relying on his crafty curve ball or slipping the odd fastball past unsuspecting hitters. He was a true sportsman and loved the camaraderie of being around the squad and treated his teammates, opponents and officials with respect."

That's right, Mr. Vooght was a quiet, soft spoken kind of guy, who never sought attention, said his sister, Carrie.

Mr. Vooght and Ilse Van Woezik of Douglas, which is my home town, met on a blind date and were married June 26, 1966 in Douglas. Ilse was not a baseball fan but became one real quick, finding something special in the handsome man. He was 28, she was 21.

"Opposites attract," she said.

In the Grips of A Terrible Disease
As for Alzheimer's, Mr. Vooght is very much

physically fine from the neck down. He hasn't put a pound on from his playing days. He told me he was "6-foot-2 and a half." During the visit I made to the Vooght household, he could amble around with

no problem, up and down the stairs to the basement where we chatted.

Above the neck, Mr. Vooght appears confused and frustrated that he can't talk much. Alzheimer's not only robs people of their

memories but makes it difficult for some to actually speak. He smiled when he saw me and he intently watched me when I ask him questions. So far, he appears not to be aggressive toward Ilse or anyone else, another tell-tale sign of the progress of Alzheimer's.

As my wife, Sherry and I left the Vooght house, I posed two final questions. When I asked Mr. Vooght who his all-time favourite major-league player was and his all-time favourite MLB team was growing up, he was stumped. The vice-grips of Alzheimer's had robbed him of much of his memory.

"Tough question," he said.

And now with her husband in the grips of a terrible disease, Mrs. Vooght is spending most of her time trying to keep him as comfortable as possible -- at home. She's the ideal person to look after him. She's a funny and insightful spirit. She's helped on occasion by son James and daughter Paula.

"He's holding his own but that could change rapidly," she said.

A few years after Mr.

Vooght retired from RCI, he and Ilse began a string of 15 consecutive winters as snowbirds in Lakeland, Florida. Even in Lakeland, he was ultra-competitive as his wife motioned to a shelf in a corner where shuffleboard awards stood. "Everything he touched he won," Mrs. Vooght said of her husband's lifelong success, most of it in baseball but also in the classroom and after hours when he coached various sports teams at RCI.

On a piece of paper before he became afflicted with his disease, Mr. Vooght had written this: "I can't ever remember a season where I lost more games than I won. I estimate a career of 23 years and about 10 wins a season."

When Mrs. Vooght began noticing her husband wasn't just quite there in 2016, they stopped their annual visits to Lakeland.

When I last talked to Mr. Vooght following our in-person chat, it was on the phone August 14. I merely followed up questions I had asked him earlier. This was a good day to chat. When I asked him how long he threw on the side

for Lasorda in Montreal whatever year that was, he said, "15-20 minutes", although he couldn't nail down the year.

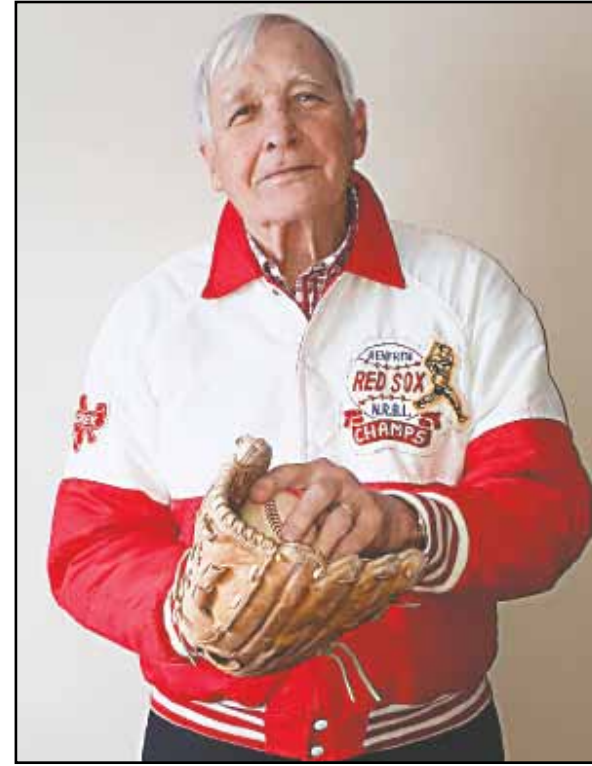
As for this cruel Alzheimer's that has tackled him, he said, "There are some things I remember, some things, I don't. I do the best I can."

I asked him about his difficulty in saying something and he replied: "I get tongue-tied."

Jack, our thoughts are with you during this rough period in your life. Too bad you couldn't throw one of your nasty curveballs at this terrible disease and get rid of it.

"Besides baseball, Jack was a great guy, always the same, always pleasant, a true gentleman in every respect," Mr. Stitt said. "I have all my life considered Jack a special person and certainly a friend."

Danny Gallagher was born in Renfrew and raised in his hometown of Douglas. His new book about the Expos is called Always Remembered, which is available at Amazon and Indigo.



Jack Vooght was a feared left-hander throughout Ontario with teams in Renfrew, Pembroke, Guelph, Douglas and Deep River.

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WHITewater WEEKLY

Curbside Waste Collection Changes

Starting October 5th, the collection contractor will now be collecting curbside garbage and recycling at the same time on your existing garbage collection day.

Week of Monday, October 5th – Thursday, October 8th - Garbage & Comingled (tin, plastic, glass) Recyclables

Week of Monday, October 12th – Thursday, October 15th - Garbage & Fiber (paper and cardboard) Recyclables

Recycling will alternate based on this schedule thereafter. Please sort accordingly.

A reminder that you can place up to two bags of garbage every week and unlimited recycling. An updated collection calendar will be provided to each household this month.

Arena Openings

Cobden Arena will be opening Tuesday, September 15. Beachburg Arena will be opening Tuesday, October 13. COVID-19 safety guidelines are in place for all rentals. For more information or to book ice times please email ready@whitewaterregion.ca.

Hazardous Waste Day

The hazardous waste day is scheduled for Saturday, September 26 from 9am to 1pm at the Mineview Garage, 2271 Mineview Road.

Utility Bills

Utility Bills have been mailed out. The due date is September 30. Payments can be made through your online banking, at the office or drop your payment off in the drop box at the front of the building. Payment plans are available.

Music in the Park

Free music and entertainment will be taking place at Veterans' Memorial Park. Check out our Calendar of Events on our website for performances and times. <https://www.whitewaterregion.ca/calendar/>

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