

Won't Fade Away

VALENZUELA SYNDROME

May 20, 1989—Sometimes, we don't even get to say goodbye. Looks like it's going to be that way with Fernando Valenzuela. At twenty-eight, the best southpaw of the decade appears washed up. Last year, he was 5-8 and missed the World Series with shoulder pain. This season, he's winless and reduced to junkballing. The Los Angeles Dodgers have all but ruined him. They didn't mean it. They just didn't know then what everybody's learning now: The faster you rise, the faster you fall.

By contrast, how much phase-in are the Angels giving Jim Abbott? Not a day. That's about how much the Mets gave Dwight Gooden and the Royals allowed Bret Saberhagen, and they're both showing signs of wear already. Before the Angels get too excited about Abbott's first career shutout this week, they should consider the long-term cost of denying him a year to experiment in the minors plus a sub-225-inning season in the majors to let his arm mature completely.

Are you paying attention, Orioles? After you draft Ben McDonald, all 6 feet 7 inches of him from LSU next month, don't rush him to the majors at twenty-one. He'd probably be good right away because, like Abbott, he's precocious and poised. But if you'll just put him on the slow track for two years, he could be great for a long time.

Valenzuela should be a lesson for a whole generation. He pitched eight shutouts at the age of twenty, including five in his first seven

major league starts, and took L.A. to a world title in '81. But now it looks as though he's over the hill—ten years too soon.

Even rivals feel pity when they see Valenzuela, who's allowed 60 runners in 35 innings and has an 0-3 mark and an ERA of almost 5.00. "His fastball was just floating up there," said Kevin Mitchell of San Francisco. "The guys were coming back to the bench saying they couldn't believe they couldn't hit him," said Pete Rose after a good Valenzuela game.

How slow is Fernando? When utility man Mickey Hatcher pitched in a Dodgers blowout recently, the radar gun clocked him at 82 mph—the same speed as Valenzuela, who sometimes can't get to 80. This is the man whose fastball once set up 1,448 strikeouts in seven years.

The Dodgers have tried to excuse themselves from guilt. They blame the screwball, although Valenzuela calls that the dumbest of theories, claiming his scroogie is easier on his arm than his curve. They blame Valenzuela's stretched anterior capsule on those 255 straight starts at the beginning of his durable career. Finally, the Dodgers hint that the culprit is Fernando's tummy. They make much of his winter workouts—with 10-pound weights.

"I really thought my career might be finished," said Valenzuela in spring training. "I was ready to say that I was lucky to pitch eight seasons in the majors, smile, and call it quits." Now, however, he buys the fitness spiel and says he feels great, although "I know it will take a long time to come back."

Perhaps the saddest part of the story is that Valenzuela still thinks all this was virtually inevitable. "It would have happened anyway," he told Steve Dilbeck of the *San Bernardino Sun*. "It was a lot of years. I pitched a lot of games. And it's not the innings, but how many pitches. I know why it happened—I threw a lot."

That's both exactly true and terribly misleading, according to statistician Craig Wright and Rangers pitching coach Tom House, who have coauthored a book called *The Diamond Appraised*. Their work includes a study of the endurance patterns of pitchers since '76.

That's 1876.

Their conclusion is that innings worked before the age of twenty-five (especially tough, late-game innings) burn up a pitcher's career at double or triple speed. Almost without exception, those like Vida Blue, who were workhorses before twenty-five, suffered truncated careers that produced little after age thirty. Burned-out pitchers such as

Frank Tanana, who become reborn as junksters, are as rare as they are courageous.

As usual, some wise men guessed long ago what Wright and House now seem to have proved. Earl Weaver preached this doctrine twenty years ago. His rule of thumb was that a young pitcher should stay in the minors an extra year. Then, use the prospect as a long reliever or spot starter in a low-pressure rookie season. Finally, once he's in the rotation, protect him from excess complete games for a season. That's a three-year phase-in. Two examples of maximized careers: Mike Flanagan and Dennis Martinez, who were decelerated for two seasons each and are still winning at ages thirty-seven and thirty-four. If Storm Davis, 16-7 at age twenty-six, has a dozen more useful years, he'll be another sample of a Weaverized pitcher.

Being a superstar at age twenty-two or younger seems to be the real killer. Twenty-four complete games at twenty-one erased Mark (the Bird) Fidrych. If you can just stay in college or the minors long enough to avoid a monster 250-inning season until you're a little older—such as Jim Palmer (twenty-four), Don Sutton (twenty-four), Steve Carlton (twenty-five), Nolan Ryan (twenty-five), Tommy John, (twenty-seven) or Gaylord Perry (twenty-seven)—you have a far better chance to win 250 games. To survive tons of innings before twenty-five, you better have perfect mechanics and the incredible lower-body strength of a Tom Seaver. How Bert Blyleven survived is still a mystery.

Among current pitchers, Greg Swindell of Cleveland may have been brought along most smoothly. Abbott and McDonald should move no faster. Also, by the luck of being a late bloomer, Orel Hershisser, thirty, may pitch until 2001.

In sports, it's sad when knowledge comes too late. That's the case for Valenzuela, who looks to the sky on every pitch but probably won't find succor. However, it's not too late to preserve the next generation of pitchers. Young phenoms don't come along very often. Luckily for them. When we see an Abbott or McDonald who's in imminent danger of being too good too soon, we now know what to do: Tell 'em to remember Fernando's fadeaway.