



Paul Spilman, Herbie Lake aka Bake McLake, and Jim Holleran at the July Fourth parade in Morristown in 2017.



## **Reflections of a River Rat:**

### **Nicknames: The akas of North Country sports**

By Jim Holleran

The first rule of nicknames -- you don't give yourself one. You don't call yourself The Messiah or Shooter. Nicknames must be given to you. They just happen. They bubble up from a joke. They fit your personality. They play off your name. But if you give one to yourself, it fades faster than the Red Sox after selling Babe Ruth to the Yankees.

When I was a boy, we studied ballplayers, quoted their stats, imitated their batting stances and mimicked their gestures. You could squat bowlegged at the plate and hold the bat erect like Yankees second baseman Hoss Clark. Or you could drop your arm slot and spin sidearm whiffleballs to home plate like some reiteration of Dan Quisenberry.

One of our neighborhood band of brothers was skinny chirper named Herbie Lake. In high school in the late '70s, Herbie developed a hate-hate relationship with Heuvelton's Brad Decker (may he RIP). They had an altercation over a slide at second base one year, then during the next basketball season Herbie unsportingly clotheslined him on a breakaway layup.

But long before Herbie and his 5-foot-8, 135-pound frame aspired to be Morristown's Jack Tatum, he developed a summer bromance with St. Louis Cardinals outfielder Bake McBride. "I'm gonna be Bake McLake," Herbie declared. It lasted about two weeks.

When I made relief appearances during Junior League games, John Perretta dubbed me Sparky for Yankees reliever Sparky Lyle. I didn't have a sharp slider, I wasn't left-handed, and I couldn't match the command of our frontline pitchers, Kevin Thibert and Andy Colburn. It was a generous compliment, but the nickname didn't stick. Later, I got Home Run Holleran from Steve LaRose, although I never homered in my life. That didn't stick either, but I often refer to myself as Warning Track Holleran.

Most nicknames develop naturally. Michael Spilman's bushy red hair made him Curly. Mr. Quackenbush was shortened, by those who called him Art, to Quack, just as those who were friendly with Bob Sargent called him Sarge.

Sports nicknames always have an edge to them or a story behind them. Larry Bird was dubbed The Hick from French Lick for his smalltown Indiana roots. A generation later, hulking Oklahoma State center James Reeves was so astounded by his first plane ride that his college teammates went with Big Country.

Doug Gwosdz of the Padres in the '80s and Doug Mientkiewicz of the Twins at the millennium shared a clever nickname – Eyechart. The only thing tougher than the spelling was the pronunciation. Gwosdz was pronounced Goosh; Mientkiewicz was enunciated as mint-KAY-vitch. They were preceded by a Temple basketball player from the 1950s called the Owl Without The Vowel, Bill Mlkvy. The Slovakian-American's name was pronounced MILK-vee.

Just to confirm my youth was misspent, let me lapse into my infomercial status – But Wait! There's more!!

Sometimes, there is a story behind the nickname. Mordecai "Three Fingers" Brown lost his right index finger in a feed chopper, but still won 239 games, mostly for the Chicago Cubs. The stub of his index finger with the remaining fingers promoted a sinking fastball, knuckle curve and changeup.

Baseball has its lifetime ban division – Charley Hustle (guys who bet on their own team like Pete Rose don't deserve Cooperstown) and Shoeless Joe Jackson, another associate of gamblers from the Black Sox Scandal.

Sportswriters had a heavy hand in lionizing characters in their stories. An Australian golf writer nicknamed Jack Nicklaus the Golden Bear, which late in his career morphed into the Olden Bear. An Illinois scribe came up with The Galloping Ghost after Red Grange eluded the Michigan defense for five rushing touchdowns and passed for another.

The competitive New York City press worked overtime on George Herman Ruth. Babe was simple enough, but along came The Great Bambino, The Sultan of Swat, The Colossus of Clout, The Caliph of Clout and The Behemoth of Bust. What is certain -- nobody ever called him late for dinner.

Different sports shared similar nicknames. The 1980s saw Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini dominate lightweight boxing ranks just as NHL goalies of the 1950s feared the slapshot of Montreal Canadiens winger Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion. A generation apart in the NFL, Kenny Stabler of the Oakland Raiders and Jake Plummer of the Denver Broncos slithered in the pocket as The Snake.

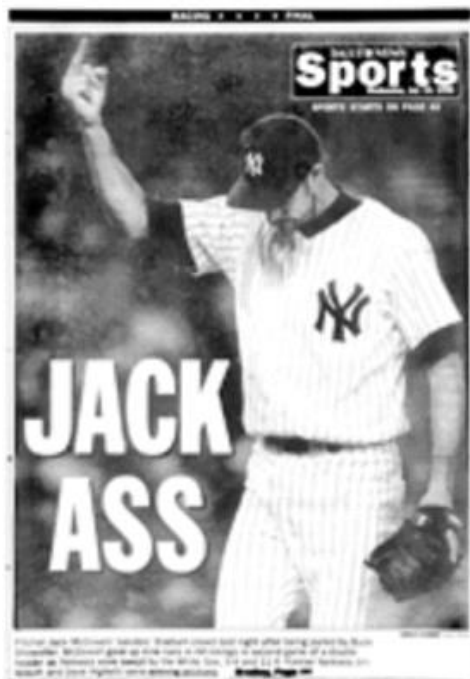
Size matters too. The girth of Chicago Bears William Perry actually resembled a Refrigerator. Charles Barkley played forward in the NBA at a mere 6-5, but could jump out of the gym before he grew into the The Round Mound of Rebound.

My greatest affinity was for the headline writers who could turn a clever phrase. In the daily battle for circulation between the New York Post and The New York Daily News, sales depended on how they could entice newsstand sales with an eye-catching combination of photo and all caps, blaring headline. So the papers committed a crew each day to fiddle with words and graphics to find that special combination. Their efforts are seared in our memories.

- On a NY Daily News federal bailout story -- FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD
- Or a NY Post crime story – HEADLESS BODY IN TOPLESS BAR
- Or the Post from 10 years ago, when the president suggested Congressman Anthony Weiner should resign over a sexting scandal – OBAMA BEATS WEINER

I generally skipped past the news and politics to get to the back cover where sports ruled. My favorite occurred the day after a multi-player swap between the New York Yankees, Detroit Tigers and Cleveland Indians on March 19, 1974. Cleveland had a squat, free-swinging outfielder named Walt Williams who was 5-foot-6 and 195 pounds. His head seemed to be affixed to his powerful shoulders hence the nickname No Neck.

The Yankees obtained Williams and two pitchers, prompting the Daily News headline – YANKS GET 2 ARMS AND NO NECK.



David Cone became a headline writers' dream on April 30, 1990 when he pitched for the New York Mets. Cone went berserk when first-base umpire Charlie Williams called a runner safe while Cone was covering first on a groundball. Without calling timeout, Cone began arguing with Williams that he beat the runner to the bag. Two runners noticed that Cone had turned his back to the infield and lumbered home to score. The next day's headline – CONEHEAD THE BONEHEAD.

The Yankees weren't exempt from sarcastic headlines either. On July 18, 1995, they had lost the opener of a doubleheader 9-4 to the Chicago White Sox and starter Jack McDowell was getting roughed up in the nightcap at Yankee Stadium. He surrendered three homers and had wild-pitched in another run, prompting a chorus of boos. When Manager Buck Showalter came out to remove him, McDowell began his walk of shame and the catcalls intensified. He showed his appreciation by saluting fans with his middle finger. The Daily News responded – YANKEE FLIPPER.

The North Country might have played its games on a smaller stage, but nicknames were plentiful. I always wondered how Mike Tooley got the nickname Toots. His golf background? His business acumen?

"In seventh grade, we were asked to write plays in an English class and then perform," Mike recalled. "My group of four wrote a play about a superhero (me), started out dressed as an old lady but when the

time came to rescue those in distress I ripped my dress off and underneath I was wearing a bikini. Someone in the class yelled, 'What a Toots.' And there you are."



Ogdensburg Journal sports editor Dave Shea was dubbed "The Doctor," which became "Doc," through his Sunday morning basketball game at OFA. "Ace Courtney and I were the slowest guys so we always guarded each other," Dave remembered. "One day, I was going down the lane and I double-clutched, as much as you can double-clutch with a 2-inch vertical, and I banked in a shot over Ace. He said, "Who are you – Doctor J?"

But wait – there's still more.

Tooley and Shea consulted on a list with my old mentor, Larry Casey of Canton, Lisbon native Rob Roy, an assistant basketball coach at North Country CC, and Section X's most successful basketball coach, Bill Merna of OFA. Here is their group effort of North Country akas (also known as):

Steve LaRose and Ralph Stick were the two youngest guys on their softball team. In re-runs of The Honeymooners, Ed Norton often called Ralph Cramden "Ralphie Boy." It was a natural fit for Stick to become "Ralphie Boy." Steve became "Stevie Boy," but he later was dubbed The Baby Bull by WSLB's morning man, John Astolfi. It was in tribute of former slugger Orlando Cepeda.

Mike "Mudshark" Badlam was an OFA shooting guard in the late 1970s. But his moniker came from a character at a Canton softball tournament. The player stood out with his ponytail, hightop sneakers and insistence on swinging a wooden bat. Badlam was captivated by the dude and soon became known as Mudshark.

Tom "Skipper" Luckie grew from late-night bowling sessions when it seemed he was throwing a skip rock in curling.

Elizabeth "Bippy" Luckie's brother Eugene struggled to pronounce her name, so Bippy stuck.

Bill "Bucket" Reed because whether it was baseball, fast pitch softball or tennis, he always stepped in the bucket yet remained a good hitter.

Howard "Mooch" Magee of Herman-Dekalb and Potsdam State was attributed to bumming cigarettes, but he told teammates it came from his mother.

Jim "Scrap Iron" Adams was named by his high school basketball coach, Lew Kibling of Lowville, for his penchant for diving on loose balls.

Umpire and referee Bob Hollombaek was known as “Holly,” but never remembered anyone’s name so he called every ball boy and manager “Butch.”

Mike “Jigger” McCabe was a referee who carried that nickname when he was a lifeguard at Jacques Cartier State Park.



Mike Mitchell was known as “Mitch” long before he pitched and played quarterback at Hartwick College, then became principal at Mechanicville.

Matt “Corn” Caufield played at OFA in the early 1990s before becoming a teacher and coach at Canton, and a top-flight ref at the boys state basketball tournament.

Alton Elliott of OFA and Guy Conklin of Heuvelton both went by “Slim.”

Tom “Scratchy” Hannan toiled 47 years at North Country Savings Bank and equally as long at St. Lawrence State Park Golf Course.

OFA baseball coach Jim Pinkerton was shortened to “Pinky” and umpire Merle Livermore was truncated to “Liver.”

Lisbon contributed Danny “Weaver” Mayne, Mike “Doc” Roy, John “Princey” Paxton, Randy “Roy Boy” Roy, Kevin “White Walls” Roy and Robert “Boobers” Pearson.

Massena gave us Jim “Ace” Deshaies, who played at LeMoyne before pitching in 12 major-league seasons. He is a TV analyst on Chicago Cubs broadcasts.

Neil Coir developed a legend as a St. Lawrence University hockey player and high school coach, earning “Toe,” likely a derivative of Toe Blake.

Lastly, nobody seemed to know the origin of Eugene “Pucker” O’Grady, but the nickname stands on its own. O’Grady served in the Marines during World War II and was sent to the Pacific theatre. In particularly heavy fighting, O’Grady shared a foxhole with Bill Gallo, who would become the celebrated NY Daily News sports cartoonist. Gallo inscribed one of his books for his wartime buddy thusly: “I couldn’t think of a better guy to be blown up with.”

One thing was certain about Pucker. You could never unwittingly misspell his nickname.

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