

A CLOSER LOOK/



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Andy Messersmith's major league career began in 1968 with California, inset, and ended in 1979 with Los Angeles, above. Today, he coaches Santa Cruz' team in the Palomino League.

Coming back

Five years later, Messersmith begins a new baseball career

By DON MILLER
Sentinel Staff Writer

SOQUEL — He was twice a 20-game winner in the major leagues. He started two World Series games. He was three times an All-Star, once the starting pitcher. He was one of the first free agents and one of the first to take big money and receive in return The Curse of the Free Agents.

He pitched in the major leagues for 12 seasons, the last three of which were blighted by The Curse, by injuries and erratic performances. In 1979, at the age of 34, his career as a major league pitcher was over.

What's his line? Name that tune. The price was right.

I've got a secret — today he's a full-time house father and part-time youth baseball coach, living in the hills above Soquel with his wife and 2-year-old son.

John Alexander (Andy) Messersmith was called up to the big leagues on July 4, 1968 by the California Angels. He joined the team in Detroit. He remembers the

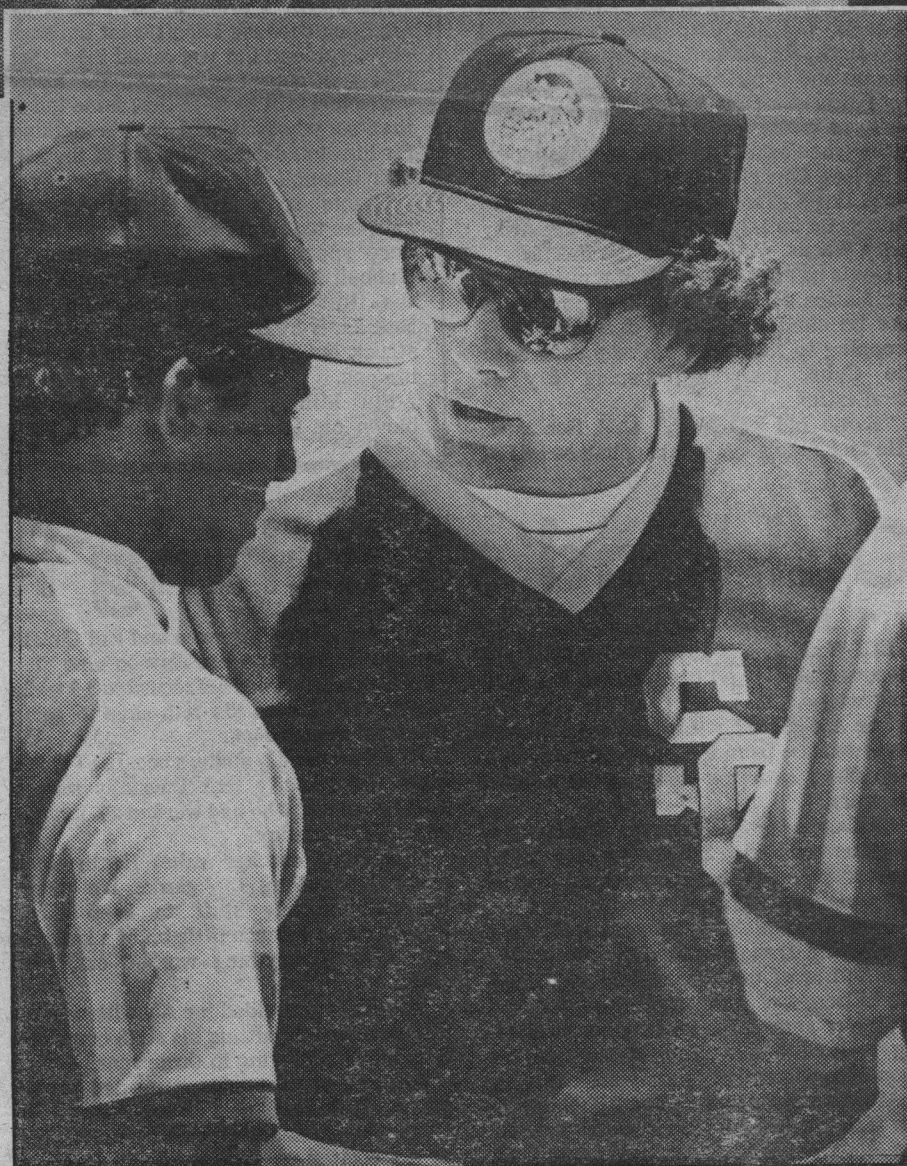
dugouts there resembling bunkers. Some joker fired an M-80 rocket inside the dugout. Welcome to the big leagues.

In 1971, Messersmith made another trip to Detroit — as a member of the American League All-Star team. He was to finish '71 with a 20-13 won-lost record for the Angels, but at the time he remembers his All-Star selection coming as a "shocker."

Earl Weaver was the A.L. manager. It was the game in which Reggie Jackson pulverized the ball and hit one of the longest home runs in an All-Star game, off Pittsburgh pitcher Dock Ellis.

"It was the longest home run I ever saw," recalls Messersmith. "It was a rocket. It hit a light standard or it still would be going."

Messersmith is seated in his living room. He's been cutting wood for the coming winter and his curly hair is still wet from the shower. Messersmith has put on a few pounds since his playing days, but still looks as if he could step onto a pitcher's mound, glare in at the hitter, take the



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catcher's sign for the next pitch and rear back and fire.

Messersmith was always a fiery competitor in his playing days. He also tried to be, as he says, "the ultimate professional." Five years after his playing career ended — he pitched for the Angels, Dodgers, Braves and Yankees — some of the fire has been dampened. It still burns, but more as a mellow glow now.

He pitched for the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1974 and it was his best season — 20 wins, six losses, a 2.59 earned run average, 221 strikeouts. He started two World Series games against the Oakland A's, tying a Series' record by losing both (in a five-game series).

He also started the All-Star game. It was nothing if not exciting — in his three innings, Messersmith allowed two hits, two earned runs, struck out four and walked three.

"I told Yogi (Berra the National League manager), 'I just want to go two (innings),' " Messersmith said. "He said, 'No, no — you gotta go three.' " He shrugs and laughs. "It was a great thrill."

The refrigerator repairman has stopped by. The refrigerator has been running all the time. The repairman patiently tells Messersmith the problem — it's an older model. Big, old motor. The only cure, naturally, is buy a new one. Messersmith takes the news without flinching. His wife, Nita, who is frequently away at work as a stewardess, is out shopping for a new dishwasher. Domestic life is just one expensive headache after another. Messersmith pays the repairman for the advice and returns.

In 1976, he signed a contract with the Atlanta Braves for an estimated \$1.75 million. It was big news. It also marked the beginning of the big chill in Messersmith's heretofore sterling career. He hurt his shoulder. He was 11-11 in '76 and was again selected to the National League All-Star squad.

He was hurt, tired. "I was burned out," Messersmith said. "I couldn't go." His selection is not in the record books, nor, says Messersmith, did he receive the usual All-Star memorabilia. The Braves' media guide also doesn't list Messersmith's '76 selection. He says the omissions are due to hard feelings over his free agency among baseball's ruling elite.

Of the free agency, Messersmith says only, "It was not the highlight of my career."

Messersmith has no plans to attend Tuesday's All-Star game at Candlestick Park. These days, his baseball is confined to Harvey West Park.

Messersmith, who served as an unofficial, volunteer assistant coach at Cabrillo College this spring, has been coaching the Santa Cruz Lions team in the Monterey Bay Palomino League, for players 16 through 18 years of age.

Messersmith is to turn 39 in August. In most fields he would still be just a pup. Not in athletics.

"In sports, 30 is 60; 35 is 65. You're done. Now what do you do?" Messersmith gives the listener a half-smile. *Life is tough.* "You've spent your whole life doing nothing but baseball."

Messersmith spent most of the years after his retirement working on his property, cutting wood, waiting, thinking ...

For the last two years he's been taking care of his son Drew while Nita is on the road.

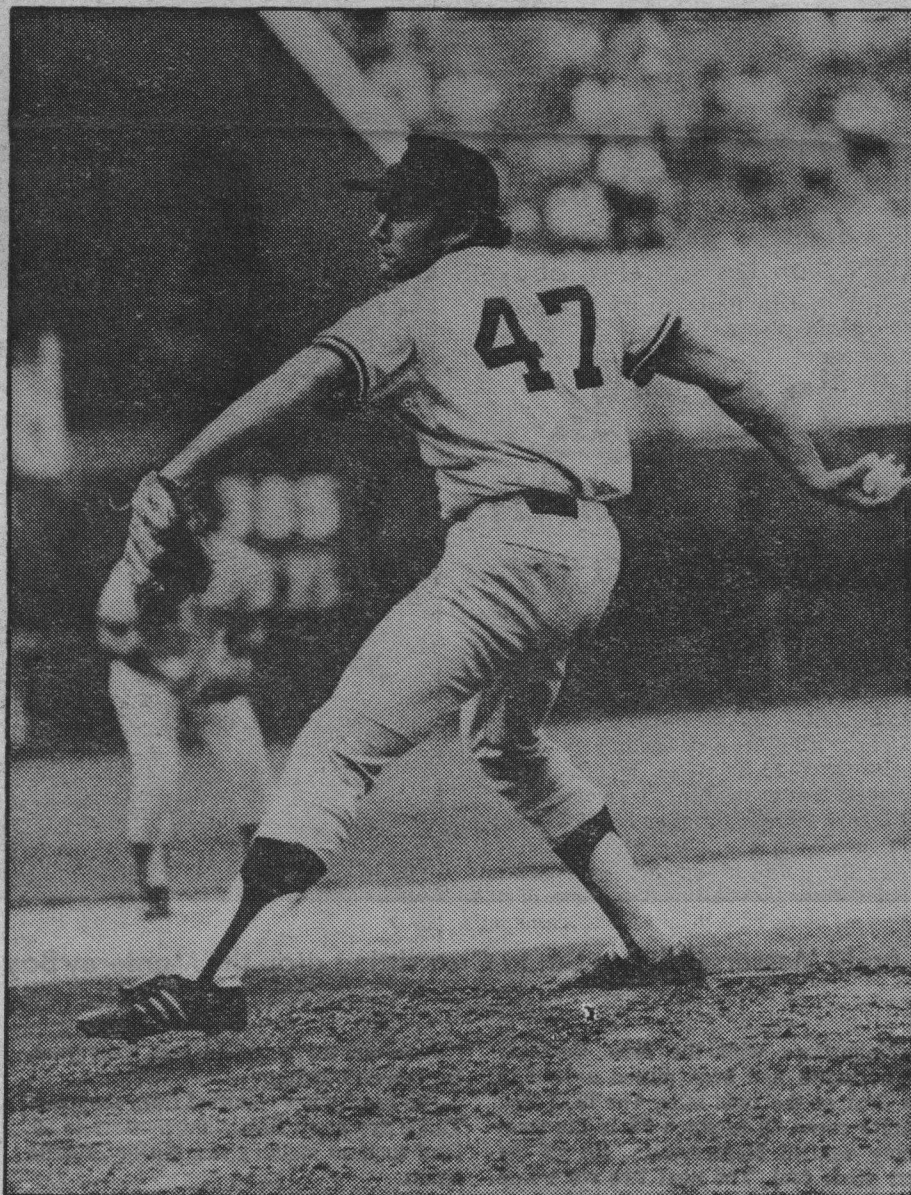
"I'm not much of a road person," he says. "Here, you can come home see your kid ... When you're young it's great — everybody loves you. Your ego gets stroked right and left. It was hard for me to leave."

The years sped by. He thought about attempting a comeback. He was out pitching batting practice at Cabrillo this spring, seeing how his arm felt. The arm felt, well, like it had been misused and abused over too many years, too many breaking balls, too many high hard ones. He'd broken his shoulder after The Curse descended. The Cabrillo players asked him



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Andy Messersmith, who left the Dodgers for free agency in 1975, resigned with them in 1979 ...



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...a year earlier, in '78, he one-hit Cleveland in his Yankee debut.

to come back, as a coach. He was happy they asked.

After the Seahawks' season ended the Palomino League opportunity came. It's clear, talking to Messersmith, that the coaching bug has planted itself deeply within his left ventricle or thereabouts.

"My number one rule as a coach is havin' fun. Number two is, 'Don't hit the coach.' "

Messersmith grins. Aw shucks. A country boy from New Jersey who studied at UC-Berkeley. "That was the thing I missed in my career," he says, "it got to be so serious. I don't mean not winning. No, perform to your fullest and once you do that you have fun."

He remembers the "fun times" occurring in the minor leagues. Sometimes. "We were striving so much. The guys who really enjoyed it were the older guys. As you're goin' up it gets a little more cut-throat."

The Palomino League is a little more suited to the 1984-model Messersmith. "These guys are serious about it," he says. "They listen, they play hard and I'm having a great time."

Messersmith dreams about starting a pitching school locally, perhaps building a small workout area on his own property. Pitching, after all, is *who he is*.

Red Adams was his pitching coach when he was with the Dodgers. Messersmith is modeling his own coaching after Adams'. He remains in frequent contact with his old coach.

Messersmith recites some of Adams' teachings; mechanics, strategies, young arms: "He taught me to work on one thing. If you could only give him (a player) one thing — what would it be? Then go with that."

Messersmith is talking freely now, obviously enjoying the subject. "I really believe in the changeup," he says. "You got a place to hide. A changeup works because it's contrast. Throw a ball 10 MPH slower than your fastball and you got

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a hitter off stride."

The change, says Messersmith, "can be great for anybody. There's very few guys who can live on a fast ball." He says he has his own system in teaching the changeup, one he says he used to teach the pitch to ex-teammate Don Sutton. His young charges, who may not (yet) pitch with major league velocity (upwards of 90 MPH) can use it with confidence.

Messersmith used to tell the hitters in pre-game batting practice he was going to throw the change — and then not do it. "It screwed them up," he says. "They were thinking about it."

He gives his players rules to play by — "same as in the big leagues. The players there are just big kids who shave more often. But you can't get on a guy after the fact."

Not like the media used to do. Messersmith says he "stopped" reading newspapers for the last six or seven years of his big league career. He quit talking to a lot of the beat writers. "The press was not my favorite thing," he says. As a collegiate athlete he says he was "scarred" by an interview he gave a well-known Bay Area sports columnist. "I never forgot that. I was never open after that."

He thinks players should be trained to use their minds as well as their bodies.

Messersmith is still smiling but the ideas are flowing faster now, one after another — "Attitude. If you've got the right attitude, you can do so much. I say, 'Don't let those guys know you're strugglin'. You're dead meat out there then.'"

When Messersmith was but a raw rookie himself, he faced his idol, No. 7 of the Yankees, The Mick. The Great Mantle. His attitude was one of awe.

"It was my first time at the (Yankee Stadium)," Messersmith remembers. The New Jersey Kid had been that anomaly among sports fans — a Yankee fan. "I got goose bumps." The Angels were in the middle of playing back-to-back



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Andy Messersmith has Santa Cruz sitting atop the Monterey Bay Palomino League standings.

doubleheaders with the New Yorkers; Messersmith had been cuffed around in the first of the twin bills. The next day, Mantle came up to pinch hit in the sixth inning against Messersmith. He hit the first pitch foul. The next two were fast balls, both strikes.

"It was kind of sad," says Messersmith.

"Here was my hero. His legs were gone. He couldn't swing."

His family has returned from shopping. There are more important matters to attend to than striking out Mickey Mantle again.

"I love raisin' Drew, I really do. And I really do like coaching," Messersmith

says. He pauses and stares into the future like a man who has thought about just that for longer than he'd admit.

"I don't know where it's going to go. It's just the river coming along. I don't even know what I'm lookin' for. I guess to be a part of whatever it is."