



The King of K

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Craig Van Hulzen doesn't flaunt it.

His family knows. His old coaches know. Some business associates know.

But by and large, people don't know.

They don't know that in the state of California, a state in which seven Hall of Fame pitchers played their high school baseball, the former Apple Valley Christian hurler is the all-time high school career strikeout king.

"Anybody who kind of searches a little bit finds it," said Van Hulzen, who works outside of Sacramento and runs his own wealth management company today. "I don't have anything on the wall at my office ... I've got the ball that broke the strikeout record, but that's it, I don't tell anybody."

Of the seven Hall of Fame pitchers who plied their trade in California high schools, three of them finished their careers ranked in the top 10 in MLB history in strikeouts — Bert Blyleven, Tom Seaver and Walter Johnson.

But it is Van Hulzen who struck out more batters in high school than anyone else in state history.

From 1987 to 1990, Van Hulzen struck out 646 batters while at Apple Valley Christian, breaking the previous record that had stood for 22 years by 48 punchouts. His total is the sixth most strikeouts all time nationally for a high school pitcher.

A left-handed power pitcher, Van Hulzen was already over six feet tall and 200 pounds as a freshman at Apple Valley Christian. His size, a low-90s fastball, four years of varsity experience and the absence of pitch counts and innings limits that exist today made the record attainable.

"I just started striking people out from the very first freshman batter and had a chance to really throw four full years," Van Hulzen said. "Back then it was a lot more liberal in how much they allowed pitchers to throw. I mean, I threw both games of a doubleheader to get us to the playoffs one day."

Van Hulzen's march to the record was a family affair. His father Dennis was the head coach and his younger brother Darin was his catcher for three of his four seasons at Apple Valley Christian.

"It was fun because we'd played together obviously since we were four or five years old, and I always caught him when he pitched," said Darin, who is now an assistant baseball coach at Granite Hills. "He trusted me and of course it wasn't very difficult to call pitches for a guy who dominated so much. It was a lot of fun that he trusted me to call his games and be a part of such an awesome career."

Van Hulzen entered his senior season 148 strikeouts shy of the CIF-Southern Section record of 566 set by Bob Goodyear of Los Angeles Lutheran and 168 strikeouts shy of the state strikeout record of 588 held by Lloyd Allen of Selma.

Already armed with his high-velocity fastball and a 6-foot-2, 220 pound frame by his senior year, Van Hulzen

added some control and became better than ever. He struck out 216 batters that senior season, the sixth-highest single-season total in state history.

"I think especially in the senior year I started to learn how to pitch a little more rather than just throw," Van Hulzen said. "I was always a power pitcher, but I had a lot more walks early in my career ... I just become more of a pitcher than a thrower."

Van Hulzen blew through the competition easily, and broke the CIF-SS record and the state record in consecutive starts.

He entered an April 27 matchup against Hesperia Christian just three strikeouts short of the CIF-SS record, and after battling some early nerves as he chased history, Van Hulzen struck out HCS' Daniel Romero on a check swing in the fourth inning to pass Goodyear.

The game was stopped and teammates presented Van Hulzen with a hat that said K-King, while others moved to congratulate him.

Even at 18, Van Hulzen wasn't one to flaunt his success.

"They just whipped that hat out and I was like, 'Really, we're going to put that hat on?' " he said. "I don't know, K-King — that's just not my style."

He finished the game with 12 strikeouts to give him 575 career strikeouts, 13 shy of Allen's state record.

The pursuit of the state record was thrown into jeopardy, however, when he dislocated his right, non-pitching shoulder diving back to first base on a pickoff attempt in the game against HCS.

But even a major injury could not stop Van Hulzen.

Just five days after breaking the section record and dislocating the shoulder, he struck out 19 Linfield Christian batters in a one-hitter to clinch AVCS' first-ever league title and become the all-time state career strikeout leader.

"(The dislocated shoulder) affected my delivery because I couldn't lift my right arm all the way," Van Hulzen said. "I just tucked my right arm in tight and just threw."

Amazingly, no one knew at the time that he had broken the state record, despite intense media coverage and attention on the CIF-SS record.

Van Hulzen himself didn't even know at the time. He only found out years later when looking through the state record book that he was the state record holder.

Nearly every major league team had sent scouts to watch Van Hulzen, and he had received scholarship interest from NCAA Division 1 schools such as Cal-State Fullerton, Arizona and San Diego.

Instead, Van Hulzen elected to attend Point Loma Nazarene, a small religious school in San Diego.

"My dad was very adamant that I go to college and not go pro out of high school, and him being a pastor played into me wanting to go to a smaller religious school," Van Hulzen said. "There were so many scouts at my games at a really, really small high school, I figured they'd be able to find me at a small Christian college."

At PLNU Van Hulzen continued to succeed, leading the Sea Lions in wins and ERA during his sophomore season. He and his coach Carroll Land were told that he would likely be drafted in between the third and fifth rounds of the major league draft after he completed his junior season.

But a series of injuries, including a torn rotator cuff that still causes Van Hulzen pain 20 years later, ended his career after his junior campaign and all interest disappeared.

His baseball career ended suddenly, but Van Hulzen didn't let the end of his career ruin his future.

He graduated from PLNU with a degree in business finance, and today he is the Founder and President of Van

Hulzen Asset Management in suburban Sacramento, where he counts more than 180 families among his clients and manages roughly 250 million dollars. He is also the President of the PLNU Foundation Board.

He said his baseball experience helped him become successful in finance and the business world, and he uses baseball metaphors liberally in his office.

“What I do in investments, it feels a lot like baseball,” he said. “No two games are the same, no two trading days are the same. You have got to be able to go with the flow of the game a little bit and understand a lot of the dynamics. It’s very much a mental thing.”

Neither he nor his family members broadcast to the world that he is the record holder. Nor does Van Hulzen mind that many people don’t know as he continues his successful business career.

But at the end of the day, the fact remains Craig Van Hulzen holds a major record that is unlikely to be broken anytime soon.

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