

Pitching Machines

Former Trib reporter tracks down stats, stories behind 'Baseball's No-Hit Wonders'

BY BOB D'ANGELO
Tribune staff

In baseball parlance, no-hitters are called pitching gems. And what began as a diamond in the rough turned into a gem for longtime journalist Dirk Lammers.

Lammers, a reporter for The Associated Press in South Dakota who spent nearly a decade working and writing at The Tampa Tribune during the 1990s, channeled his passion for baseball — and, specifically, no-hitters — into his first book, "Baseball's No-Hit Wonders: More than a Century of Pitching's Greatest Feats" (Unbridled

Books; paperback; \$18.95) is more than just a rehash of the game's 294 official "no-nos." It's full of stories, statistics, charts and memories, and grew out of a website Lammers created in 2008.

Lammers will be in Tampa, where he earned a degree in mass communications at the University of South Florida, at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday for a book-launching



Dirk Lammers channeled his passion for baseball into a book.

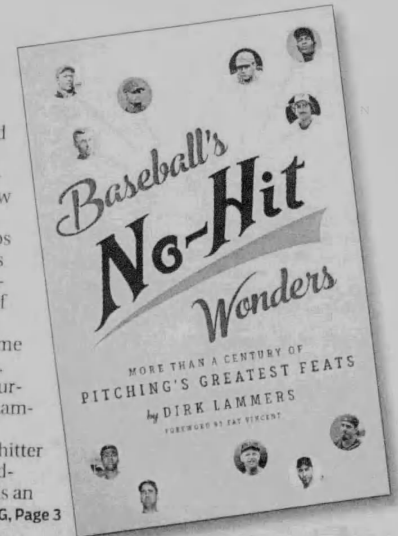
party at Love's Artifacts Bar and Grille, 4918 S. MacDill Ave.

No-hitters have always fascinated Lammers, 47, a rabid New York Mets fan who grew up in Freehold, New Jersey. His Topps baseball card collection of Mets from 1962 through 2015 is complete except for one key piece of cardboard: a 1967 Tom Seaver rookie card. He saw his first game at Shea Stadium on July 3, 1975.

"Jerry Koosman pitched a four-hit shutout against the Cubs," Lammers said.

But he never witnessed a no-hitter in person. His father and two older sisters did when Lammers was an

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infant, watching Pittsburgh's Bob Moose stop the Mets on Sept. 20, 1969, at Shea.

By 2006, a no-hitter still eluded Lammers and the Mets, so he created the website NoNoHitters.com.

"It became this ridiculous amount of research," said Lammers, who is a member of the Society for American Baseball Research. But it generated interest in the New York area, particularly from The New York Times and the The Wall Street Journal.

On June 1, 2012, the Mets' streak ended after 8,019 games and 35 one-hit games. Johan Santana pitched the first no-hitter in franchise history, beating the St. Louis Cardinals 8-0. Santana was aided by a controversial umpire's call and a great catch in left field by Mike Bester, but he finally broke the spell. That left Lammers at a crossroads.

"I said, 'What do I do with this site?'" he said. "The next year I went out to San Diego — they've never had a no-hitter (and still don't) — so I turned the focus of the site to that."

"Mets fans embrace that inferiority complex, with them playing second fiddle to the Yankees. There just wasn't that appetite in San Diego."

Lammers retitled his site to cover everything about no-hitters, and it still exists today. Then, he decided to achieve a longtime goal.

"I thought, why not write a book?" he said.

Working for the AP in Sioux Falls, Lammers took a week of vacation in May 2014 and did some interviews.

"I figured I'd write it like 31 separate news stories with the same theme," he said.

After his vacation, Lammers worked on the book at night, but finally decided to take a yearlong sabbatical before returning to the AP in August 2015. It was a year of fascinating interviews and memorable stories.

"I tried to do interviews in person when I could," Lammers said. "I was at Fenway Park talking to Clay Buchholz (who in 2007 pitched a no-hitter in his second major-league start for the Red Sox) and realized that Andy Hawkins who held the White Sox hitless in 1990 but lost 4-0 when his teammates committed some key errors) was the pitching coach for the Rangers. So I went over to talk with him and he remembered everything down to a T."

Lammers said his most memorable interview was a chat with Don Larsen, who pitched the only perfect game in a World Series in 1956.

"That was the coolest thing for me,

Book-launching Party

Dirk Lammers will sign copies of "Baseball's No-Hit Wonders: More than a Century of Pitching's Greatest Feats" at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday at Love's Artifacts Bar and Grille, 4918 S. MacDill Ave., Tampa.

having Don Larsen talk about the game," he said.

Lammers also spoke with Milt Pappas, who threw a no-hitter in 1972 but missed a perfect game in the bottom of the ninth inning when he walked Larry Stahl on a 3-2 pitch.

"He's still griping about it like it happened yesterday," Lammers said and laughed.

Lammers also spoke with Matt Garza — who threw the only no-hitter in Tampa Bay Rays history in 2010 — during a Mets-Brewers game last year.

While the subjects in "Baseball's No-Hit Wonders" range from the famous to the obscure, Lammers was unable to interview two of baseball's most prolific no-hit masters, Sandy Koufax, as usual was reclusive, while Nolan Ryan proved to be elusive.

"I got to know (Ryan's) secretary quite well from calling, but I just couldn't get through," Lammers said. "And Sandy Koufax you know is tough."

Lammers did score a coup when he persuaded former baseball commissioner Fay Vincent to write the book's foreword.

"He was one of the first interviews I did; we talked about 45 minutes," Lammers said. "When I was trying to think of someone to write the foreword, my wife said, 'Why don't you ask Fay Vincent?' and I said, 'He's not gonna have time.'"

But Lammers called, and Vincent agreed to read the book and liked it.

Lammers came to Tampa in 1986, where he enrolled as a freshman at USF. In 1991, he was hired at the Tribune to work on the communications desk. He soon was writing for the Friday Extra! section, then did general reporting for the paper's University and Peninsula sections.

After leaving the Tribune in 1999, he worked for the AP in Tampa. Looking for a full-time spot, Lammers asked a colleague in Miami about job opportunities.

"He said there was an opening in Sioux Falls, and I said I didn't know where it is," Lammers said.

After a dozen years in South Dakota, he has adjusted.

"There's very little sports in Sioux Falls," Lammers said. "Hockey is not a hotbed in South Dakota like it is in North Dakota or Minnesota. I live 15 minutes from the Minnesota line, and once you step across that border you're in hockey country."



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