

No regrets: From the archives looks at David Hulse

Former Ranger fondly recalls short career in majors

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — If not for being involved in two of the funniest moments in baseball history and stroking the first hit in The Ballpark in Arlington, San Angelo native David Hulse's major league career would have been rather nondescript thanks to injuries that cut his career short.

But you won't hear him complain about that.

The Central High School graduate might still be playing baseball today at the age of 41 if he had stayed healthy, but he doesn't feel sorry for himself that his career ended abruptly at the young age of 28.

He knows how fortunate he was to realize that one-in-a-million dream of playing Major League Baseball in the first place.

"I got hurt at 28, which is normally when most players hit their prime," the former Texas Rangers and Milwaukee Brewers player said recently in a phone interview from his home in Colleyville. "That's a hard pill to swallow. These could've been the best years of my life in there. But I don't regret the five years that I got in."

During his three-year stint with the Rangers, Hulse had a comical moment in the mid-1990s when he slapped four straight foul balls into the California Angels' dugout, nearly hitting players and coaches even as they kept moving toward what they thought was safer territory.

"Oh my gosh, now that was funny," said Hulse, who recently purchased a DVD of the at-bat to show at next spring's inaugural Bobcat Athletics Hall of Fame ceremony in which he will be one of the inductees.

Hulse had a cameo appearance in another play that makes the funniest-sports-moments shows.

Many have seen the footage of Carlos Martinez's home run that bounced off Jose Canseco's head and over the fence in a 1993 game against the Cleveland Indians. Hulse is the guy in the outfield who runs up to him laughing.

"I get calls and (text messages) about it all the time," Hulse said.

While those plays ensure that Hulse won't soon be forgotten, he etched his name into the history book when the Rangers unveiled their new stadium in 1994 and Hulse recorded the first hit there.

"Now the only reason I'm remembered for anything is because I got the first hit in The Ballpark," Hulse joked.

The comic elements of his career are appropriate, because it's funny the way things worked out in Hulse's path to the major leagues.

He was a standout basketball player at Central in the late 1980s and he was determined to play that sport in college.

The only problem was, most college basketball coaches aren't going to come knocking on your door when you're 5-foot-11.

"I was so hung up on basketball," Hulse said. "You just had to watch TV or look around in basketball leagues and nobody's short."

So Hulse turned his attention to baseball his senior year and had such a strong season under Central's then-head coach Rex Scofield that he began to entertain thoughts of playing the sport in college.

Scofield said Hulse was one of the hardest-working players he coached, but what really stood out about him was his speed.

A couple of weeks before his freshman year in college, Hulse still hadn't received offers to play anywhere.

Hulse's next-door neighbor, Tim Reid, was an assistant football coach at Angelo State University at the time. Reid knew the head baseball coach at Navarro Junior College, so he called him about offering Hulse a scholarship.

The Navarro coach said he couldn't give Hulse a scholarship, but he'd give him the opportunity to walk on.

"That was the start of it right there," Hulse said.

Hulse earned all-conference honors at Navarro.

He later transferred to Schreiner College and was drafted by the Rangers in 1992 and began to work his way up through the minor leagues.

Hulse went to two rookie leagues and struggled at first but ended up leading the league in hitting. He went to the high-A ball Florida state league, then spent half a season with the Tulsa Drillers.

You're in the

big leagues now

About halfway through Hulse's Double A season at Tulsa in 1992, the Drillers' manager told him he was being called up to the big leagues.

At first, he thought his skipper was joking.

"But he was serious," Hulse said. "As soon as I heard that, I knew it was real."

In his first at-bat as a big leaguer, he lined a single up the middle against Minnesota Twins pitcher Willie Banks.

"It was just downhill after that," Hulse said with a laugh. "I should've quit after that first at-bat."

Hulse hit .302 for the Rangers in that first season in 1992, and the next season, his first full year in the big leagues, he was named the Rangers' Rookie of the Year after hitting .290, scoring 71 runs and drawing 26 walks.

During Hulse's stint with the Rangers, the team was full of some of the biggest names in the game — Canseco, Nolan Ryan, Ivan "Pudge" Rodriguez, Juan Gonzalez, Rafael Palmeiro and Kevin Brown, to name a few.

In the Rangers' outfield, you had the towering giants Canseco and Gonzalez, with little David Hulse sandwiched in between.

Canseco and Gonzalez were known primarily for their home-run power, while Hulse was known for his speed and defensive prowess.

Hulse played on a team full of all-stars, some of whom like Canseco, Gonzalez and Palmeiro were also later linked to steroid use.

"It went on on our team, and I didn't even know it when I was on the team," Hulse said. "It's not like you're in the locker room and everyone is just shooting up."

The Rangers' roster was full of great hitters, but Texas didn't have a strong enough pitching rotation to make the playoffs during Hulse's time.

"We had an explosive lineup, like the Rangers normally do," Hulse said. "But it came down to pitching. From 1993 on, the key ingredient has still been pitching. The rule of thumb is, 'Good pitching always beats good hitting.'"

Hulse has fond memories of his former Rangers teammates, especially Ryan, baseball's all-time strikeout king.

"I loved Nolan," Hulse said. "He was quiet, but when he spoke, it was something you needed to hear or it was just something funny. His work ethic was amazing. He was all business."

Maybe God was trying to tell | him something

After three seasons with the Rangers, Hulse was traded to the Brewers.

In 1995, Hulse's first season in Milwaukee, he had a lot of career firsts.

Then in 1996, he came in to pinch run against his old team, the Rangers, and Hulse suffered a debilitating injury sliding into home plate.

"The key to this story is that Pudge never catches a day game after a night game," Hulse said. "And this was a day game, which means Pudge wasn't in there, which would've helped because Pudge doesn't like to block the plate."

Dave Valle was catching for the Rangers that day, which turned out to be bad luck for Hulse.

Hulse was on third base when one of his Brewers teammates hit the ball toward first base.

He said he wasn't trying to run over Valle at home plate. He was trying to get around him and touch the outside of the plate.

The ball went between Valle's legs when Hulse slid into home and Valle planted him.

"He sent my humerus into my chest," Hulse recalled, referring to the bone that extends from the shoulder to the elbow. "It was completely dislocated and it just tore everything up."

Hulse flew to Birmingham, Ala., to get checked out by world-reknowned orthopedic surgeon James Andrews.

"He sat back in the chair and just looked at the floor for a while and it seemed like an eternity and he goes, 'Here's what I'm going to try to do. I'm going to try to get this arm to where you can play catch with your son one day,'" Hulse said. "Seriously, I'm thinking like two weeks and he's saying things like this.

"So he was right. It was serious. I moved to Birmingham and I had surgery every two months for a whole year."

Hulse rehabbed until he thought he could play again, but no major league teams were interested in him anymore because "the risk factor was too much of a gamble."

"There were times right afterward where I'd say, 'Let me try it again,'" Hulse said. "Every time I'd get that thought, I'd hurt something.

"This is God's way of telling me, 'You're done.'"

During his five-year major league career, Hulse was a .266 hitter who scored 207 runs, had 336 hits, 35 doubles, 20 triples, five home runs and drove in 103 runs. He also stole 69 bases and had an on-base percentage of .307 and a fielding percentage of .985.

No regrets because

family comes first

Since his baseball career was cut short by injuries, Hulse has been able to focus on family life more than he would have if he'd had more longevity.

He stays busy as a personal fitness trainer these days in the Dallas area. One of his clients is an ex-Rangers teammate, pitcher Darren Oliver, who is currently playing for the Los Angeles Angels in the American League Championship Series.

Hulse has had the luxury of watching his two children chase their athletic dreams. Hulse and his wife, Helen, have a boy and a girl — 12-year-old Jaxon and 10-year-old Haylee.

"It's been great because I realize even though my career was cut short, I've had 10 years following my kids' short lives," Hulse said. "I would do it again. I have no problem with that. Money's not everything."

Hulse is still

a Ranger at heart

Hulse still sees some of his old Rangers teammates during the annual alumni game in Arlington. That gives him the occasional itch to play baseball again.

"If I could throw, I'd be out there," Hulse said. "I could fall out of bed and still hit and run. But you've got to throw it a long way from center field, the last time I checked."

Hulse still gets complimentary tickets to Rangers games but he doesn't attend often. But he still keeps up with the team and likes the direction the Rangers are going, even though a late-season collapse hurt their chances of making the playoffs this year.

"The young kids they've brought up have performed and they've got good potential, so we'll see," Hulse said.

As for his legacy, Hulse knows how he wants to be remembered.

"I want to be known for playing the game as hard as possible, playing it the right way," he said. "Play the game hard. Play every game like it's your last."

"That's what I did. Even if I wasn't one of the top elite athletes, I know I played the game right. Did it cost me my career? Probably. But so what? I played the game right for five years and I would play it that way if I had to replay it again."



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