

“That ____ Eaton Pitch”

-uttered by numerous opponents over the years in regard to Eaton’s knuckle curveball, with various derogatory terms used to fill in the blank




Numerous Reds’ pitchers, after tremendous high school careers that culminated in being drafted by MLB teams, had great success with their knuckle curves in college and the pros. Above: Kyle Ottoson starts in Game 3 of Super Regionals for Arizona State vs. Texas and leaves the game with the lead, and Shane Dyer’s first of many baseball cards (rising all the way to Triple-A) show his knuckle curve grip.

Coach Danley learned the knuckle curve from a pitcher* at Oklahoma State in the late 1980’s, researched it, taught it, and embraced it fully, and went on to win 20 of the Reds’ 21 spring and summer state titles with the victorious Reds’ pitcher throwing the knuckle curve. While the pitch breaks down sharply like a curve ball, it has no curve ball spin or potentially damaging elbow torque like a curve ball, and so the name of the pitch is misleading. With this in mind, maybe what the Reds’ opponents called the pitch was a much better description: “that ____ Eaton pitch.”

The Reds were frankly honored by the term, but more honored by the swings and misses (and sometimes quite ugly ones at that) at the pitch. The knuckle curve and Eaton’s Championship Years are so intertwined it would be redundant to other material on EatonBaseball.com to focus an entire story on the pitch, however as one example of its dominance, the Reds in the 2008 State Championship found themselves clinging to a 3-1 lead with the opponent loading up the bases with no outs, at which point the Reds threw 9 straight knuckle curves, producing 9 straight strikes, and ending the inning and effectively the game. The following pages are from a 2005 presentation (with updated records through 2015) that Coach Danley presented to numerous other coaches, and as such the grip shown in the attached isn’t exactly quite right, nor was the grip even remotely correct when photographed for a newspaper article in 1988 as the Reds and Coach Danley thought they had something special here that they might want to keep to themselves. It turned out to be pretty special, as the Reds had the best winning percentage in all of baseball (HS, college, and pro) from the day they first used it through 2015, winning 21 spring and summer state championships, and producing dozens of college scholarship pitchers, many with below-average God-given velocity, but with a nearly unhittable pitch.

**The pitcher that Coach Danley watched throwing the knuckle curve was Pat Hope, who led Oklahoma State in 1987 to the College World Series and earned All College World Series honors, becoming the first Oklahoma State pitcher to earn such an honor since 1961. In 1987, Hope struck out 107 batters en route to a 13-3 record with 12 complete games and 2 shutouts, and then went 11-1 in 1988 to finish his career at Oklahoma State before being drafted by the Kansas City Royals. Pat Hope was inducted into the prestigious Cape Cod League Hall of Fame after posting an 11-1 record in the summer of 1987, pitching a complete game in every outing, striking out 96 batters in 115 innings, and hurling the only known perfect game in the league’s modern era. He was named the league’s outstanding pitcher and still owns team records for most wins, best winning percentage, most complete game, most innings pitched, most strikeouts and is tied for most no-hitters.*



The Knuckle Curveball

Jim Danley

Head Baseball Coach

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Importance of “Out Pitch”

- ◆ 75% of Success in Baseball Derives from Pitching
- ◆ 75% of Success in Pitching Derives from “Out Pitch”
- ◆ Thus 56% ($75\% \times 75\%$) of Coaching Efforts & Practice Time Should be Devoted to Development of “Out Pitch”



Characteristics of “Out Pitch”

- ◆ Usually Thrown Hard
- ◆ Sharp Break
- ◆ Typically at or below the Knee
- ◆ Easily Mistaken for Another Pitch
 - Especially for a fastball
- ◆ Easy on Arm
- ◆ Legal



Examples of “Out Pitches”

- ◆ Great Fastball with Movement – Nolan Ryan
- ◆ Splitter – Roger Clemens
- ◆ Slider – Randy Johnson
- ◆ Curveball – Sandy Koufax
- ◆ Spitter, Grease Ball, Scuff Ball, et al – Gaylord Perry
 - A number of pitchers prior to banning of spitter in 1921
 - Hall of Famer Big Ed Walsh (CHI-A, 1904-1917)

AND

- ◆ The Knuckle Curveball – Mike Mussina
 - A handful of pitchers prior to 1940s, including Hall of Famer Jesse Haines (STL, 1918-1937)

I'd be skeptical too...

- ◆ You may not have heard of pitch, but
 - It was thrown in 2004 ALCS by Mussina
 - It's not a new pitch, it's actually one of the oldest breaking pitches
 - First thrown by man that was born during the Civil War
 - Developed prior to the floating knuckleball, splitter, circle-change, and others
 - It has been thrown ever since, though only sporadically at MLB level
 - Eaton, CO (population ~3,500) could be the only place on Earth it's taught systematically, but results speak for themselves:
 - Pre-Knuckle Curve, 1972-1986
 - 199-78 (72% win), 0 State Championships
 - Using Knuckle Curve, 1987-2015
 - 608-85 (88% win), 21 State Championships (11 High School & 10 Legion)
 - 20 of 21 State Championship Game wins had Knuckle Curve pitcher on mound

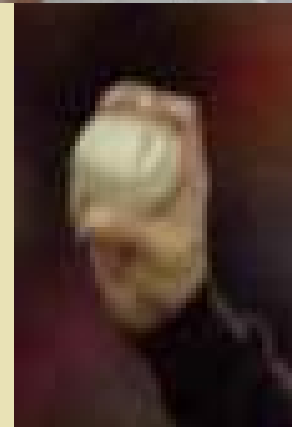
Former MLB Umpire Ron Luciano on Knucklers:

“Like some cult religion that barely survives, there has always been at least one—rarely more than 5 or 6—devotees throwing the knuckleball in the big leagues...

...not only can't pitchers control it, hitters can't hit it, catchers can't catch it, coaches can't coach it, and most pitchers can't learn it. The perfect pitch.”

Different from the Knuckleball

- ◆ Distinguished from Knuckle Ball
 - Rotations
 - More rotations (7-8 vs. 1-1 ½)
 - Speed
 - Thrown w/ max. velocity
- ◆ Knuckle Curveball Commentary
 - Tim McCarver on Mike Mussina's Knuckle Curve
 - Dave Stenhouse
 - 1962 All-Star Game Starter for Washington Senators



Mike Mussina Showing Knuckle Curve Grip

Knuckle Curveball Characteristics

- ◆ All Characteristics of Out Pitch
 - Thrown Hard
 - 6-9 mph slower than fastball
 - Sharp Break
 - Similar to a spitball's break, not parabolic arc like regular curve
 - Typically at or below the Knee
 - Often ends up in the dirt
 - Easily Mistaken for Fastball
 - Spin
 - Speed
 - Easy on Arm
 - No elbow involvement, 12 year-olds throw it
 - Legal
 - Unlike similar spitball



**2008 Colorado Pitcher of the Year Kyle Ottoson,
Drafted 5 Times, Signed with Padres**

History of the Knuckle Curveball

- ◆ 1868-Bobby Matthews of the Lord Baltimores is credited with 1st spitball
- ◆ 1885-Thomas “Toad” Ramsey (LOU/STL), from Indianapolis, becomes first pitcher in history to throw knuckle curveball, pitch known as “drop curve”
- ◆ 1886-Ramsey leads AA with 66 CGs, throws 588 2/3 innings, .198 Opp. BA
- ◆ 1890-Ramsey completes stellar career with lifetime 3.29 ERA, .234 Opp. BA
- ◆ 1906-Ramsey dies; Eddie Cicotte & Ed Summers take credit for inventing knuckleball in minors (Indianapolis)
- ◆ 1909-Cicotte goes 14-5 (BOS) with 1.94 ERA (knuckleball); Summers goes 19-9 (DET) with 2.24 ERA (“dry spitter”)
- ◆ 1921-Spitball banned from MLB
- ◆ 1922-Eddie Rommel (PHI-A) relies on knuckleball to lead majors with 27 wins
- ◆ 1922-Jesse Haines (STL) begins throwing knuckle curve
- ◆ 1923-Haines uses knuckle curveball as primary pitch and goes 20-13 with 3.11 ERA
- ◆ 1925-Fred Fitzsimmons (NYG/BRO) begins throwing knuckle curveball as primary pitch, becoming 2nd such pitcher of the era to do so
- ◆ 1927-Haines leads N.L. in CGs (25) and shutouts (6) with 24-10 record
- ◆ 1930-Fitzsimmons leads N.L. in winning percentage with 19-7 record
- ◆ 1934-Haines leads N.L. in fewest runs allowed
- ◆ 1937-Haines completes Hall of Fame career with lifetime ERA of 3.64
- ◆ 1940-Fitzsimmons leads the N.L. in winning percentage with 16-2 record

Pioneers of the Knuckle Curve & Knuckleball



Toad Ramsey

1885-1890

Knuckle Curve



Eddie Cicotte

1905-1920

Floater



Ed Summers

1908-1912

Knuckle Curve



Eddie Rommell

1920-1932

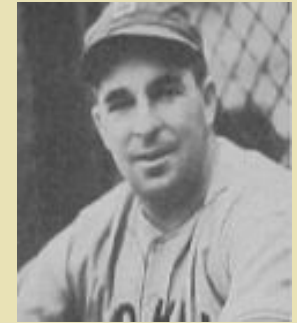
Floater



Jesse Haines **Fred Fitzsimmons**

1918-1937

Knuckle Curve



1925-1943

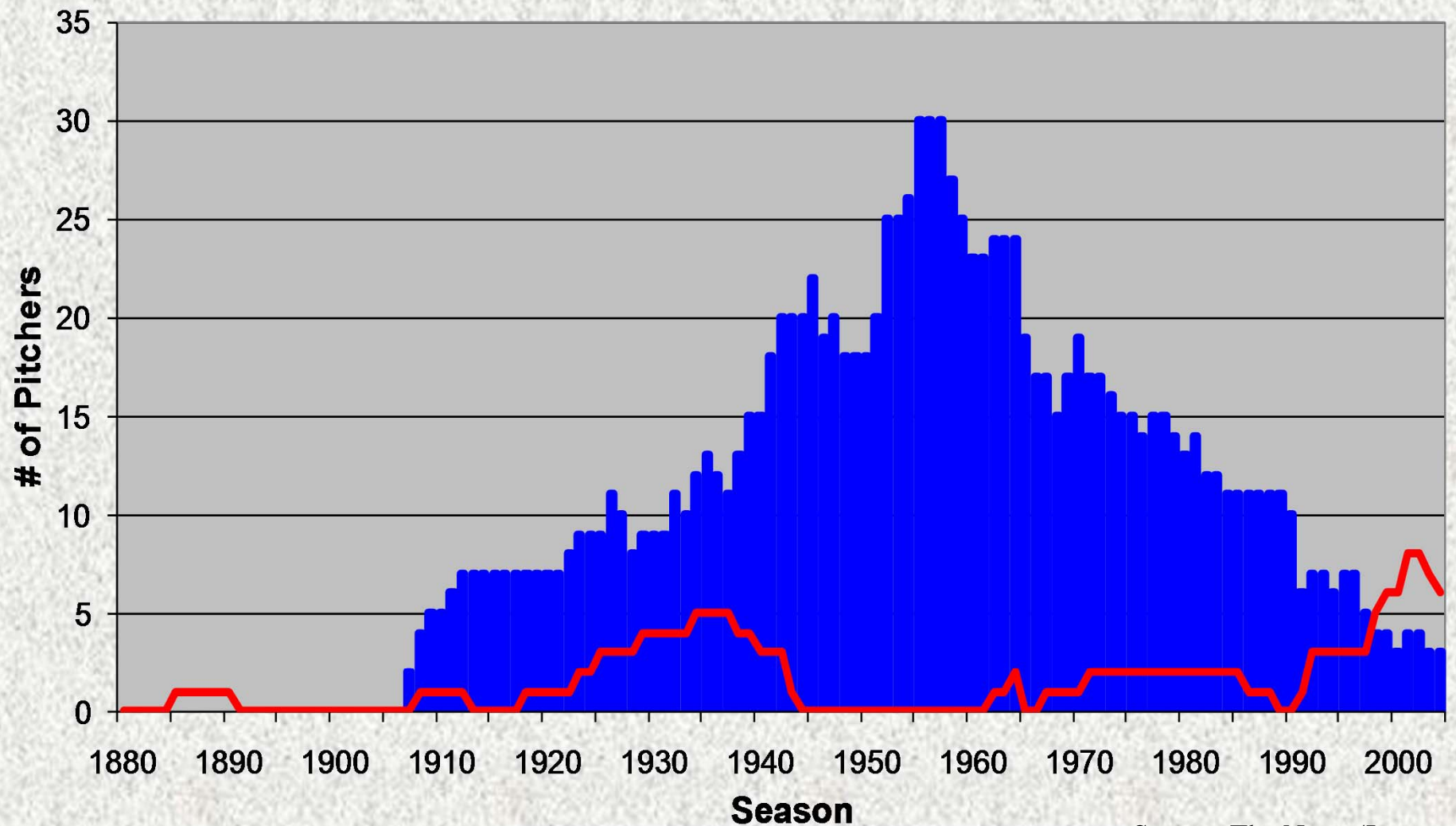
Knuckle Curve

“Nowadays these fellows call theirs the wobbly type. It doesn’t turn like a curve. It floats. Some of them call it a floater. They never know which way it will break. Sometimes it breaks down and sometimes it breaks up. That’s why they are so hard to catch.

When I threw a knuckler—the right way—I pushed my two fingers forward and usually knew exactly where the ball was going.”

Fat Freddie Fitzsimmons, June 10, 1953, *The Sporting News*

MLB Knuckleball and Knuckle Curveball Pitchers



■ Knuckleball — Knuckle Curveball

Source: The Neyer/James
Guide to Pitchers & Internet
Research

The Pitch Fades Into Obscurity...

- ◆ 1940s – World War II
 - # of players drafted
 - Larry French drafted
 - Few pitching coaches
- ◆ 1950s – Rise of the Slider
 - Easy to control in era of shrinking strike zone
 - Easier to throw than knuckler
 - Success of Bob Feller, Jim Bunning, Bob Lemon
 - “Knucklers belong in the bullpen”
 - Hoyt Wilhelm, Eddie Fisher, Wilbur Wood
- ◆ 1960s – Era of Pitching Dominance
 - Heyday of low ERAs and runs scored
 - Less reason to throw difficult pitch
- ◆ 1970s – Circle Change-Up Becomes Prominent 3rd Pitch
 - Success of Andy Messersmith, Mario Soto
- ◆ 1980s – Splitter En Vogue
 - Success of Bruce Sutter
 - Teaching by Roger Craig

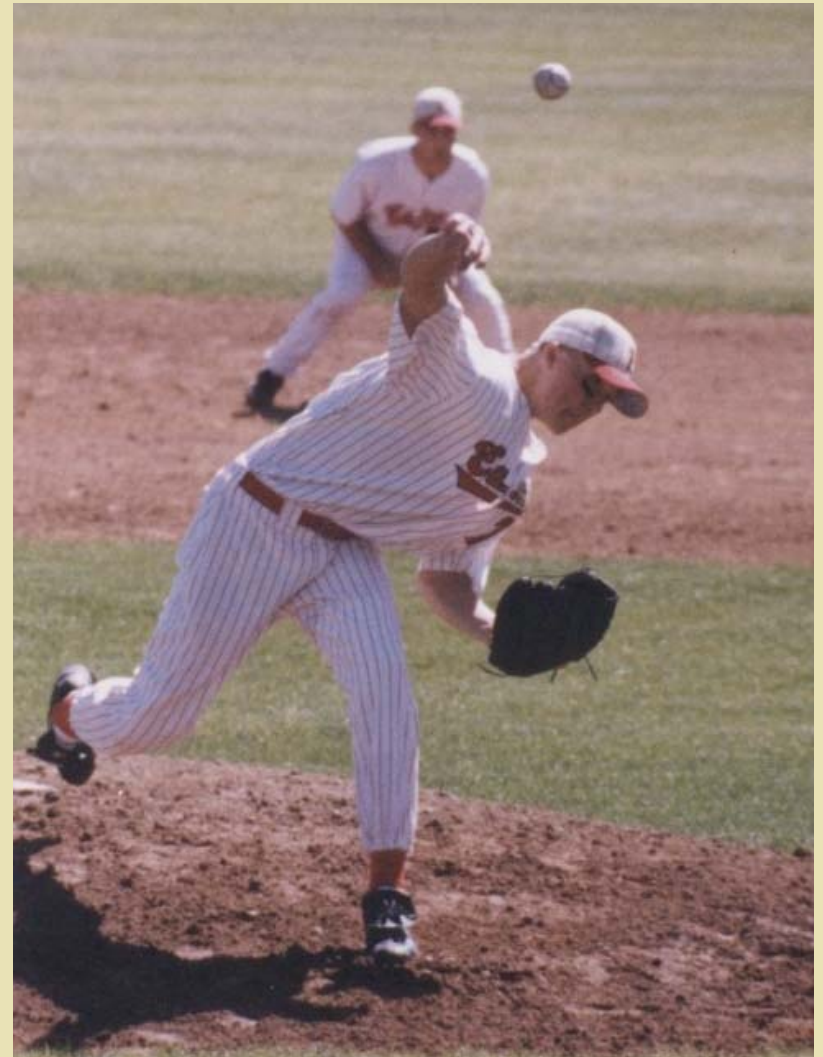
...But Doesn't Disappear Completely

- ◆ 1962-1964 Dave Stenhouse (WAS)
 - Started '62 All-Star Game
- ◆ 1971-1985 Burt Hooton (CHC/LA)
- ◆ 1987 – Knuckle Curveball Makes Debut at Eaton High School
 - Every roster since has included at least 1 knuckle curveball pitcher, usually many knuckle curveball pitchers on roster
 - 21 State Championships won, 20 of them with 1 or more knuckle curve pitchers on the mound
- ◆ 1990s – Present
 - Mike Mussina (NYY)
 - \$16MM/yr.; Game 1 Starter
 - Doug Brocail, R.A. Dickey, Wade Miller, Jared Fernandez, and others



Advantages of Knuckle Curve

- ◆ Looks like fastball
 - Velocity
 - Spin
 - Trajectory
 - Physics experiments
 - Grip
- ◆ Snaps down
- ◆ Pitcher confidence
- ◆ Ground balls put in play
 - Very few extra base hits
- ◆ Hard to hang



Eaton Red throwing Knuckle Curveball

Disadvantages of Knuckle Curve

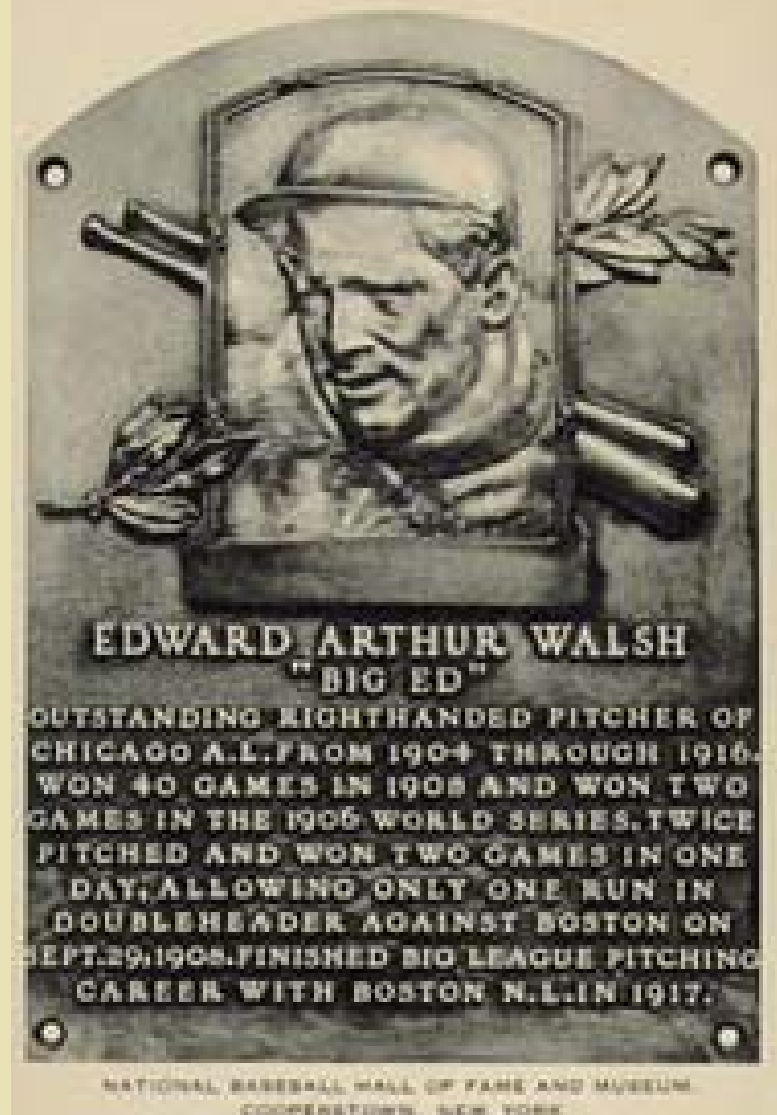
- ◆ Time commitment
- ◆ Difficulty with control
- ◆ Have to disguise grip
- ◆ Finger/Fingernail strength
- ◆ Requires stud catcher



Eaton 7th Grader Throwing Knuckle Curve

Similarities with Spitball

- ◆ Spin
- ◆ Velocity
- ◆ Break
- ◆ Trajectory
- ◆ Big Ed Walsh
 - 40-15 Record in 1908
 - Lifetime 1.82 ERA
 - Lifetime Opp. BA .218



Technique

- ◆ Grip
- ◆ Release
 - Push Over
 - 7-8 Rotations
- ◆ Thrown for:
 - Strike
 - Strikeout



Drills

- ◆ Knuckleball
- ◆ Spin
- ◆ Push Over
- ◆ Reverse Spin Toss
- ◆ Big Ed Walsh “Aim Small, Miss Small” Drill



**Eaton 7th Grader
Gripping Knuckle Curve**

Success of Knuckle Curveball

- ◆ Eaton Reds Baseball
- ◆ 1972-1986
 - 199 - 78 (72%)
 - 0 State Championships
- ◆ 1987-2015 (Knuckle Curve Implemented)
 - 608 - 85 (88%)
 - 21 State Championships
 - 11 High School & 10 Legion



1995 State Championship