

Pitch and catch

It sounds odd, but Chris Haney wasn't really known for his pitching his first three years in high school. "I pitched but I didn't pitch a lot," he says. "I was never the best guy on the team, pitching, arguably until my senior year in high school."

What he liked to do was hit, posting a .400+ average. "I really liked hitting. I was never really strong enough to hit a lot of home runs. But I did okay. I always hit third in the lineup."

It was that magical senior year when he realized he could go further as a pitcher than as a hitter. "I don't think the reason I made it was because I was left handed but it certainly made the path a little easier," he readily admits.

In the major leagues, Chris says he hit "like every other pitcher. I didn't embarrass myself. I could handle a bat. I might have had four or five hits in the big leagues." But on the mound, it was different.

He picks up a baseball and attempts to explain his various pitches to this clueless reporter. He had three: a fastball, a curve ball, and a changeup. "A fastball basically is as hard as you can throw it," he explains the obvious. For him that would be about 88 miles per hour, although he has thrown in the low 90s. Some pitchers who throw faster than that, throw it straight. But, Haney adds "if you're throwing 88 miles an hour, it had better move. It better appear to go one place and end up somewhere else."

He feels his best pitch was a "cutter," a fastball that moved in on a right-handed batter, jamming him. The strategy is, "You spend a lot of time on the label of their bat." He also had a sinker which is a similar pitch,

that goes the other way...for him, a lefty, it moves left to the outside of a right handed batter.

It all boils down to physics, how the spinning seams of the ball interact with the air. A four-seam fastball will move more than a two-seam fastball because the fingers snapping off four seams will make the ball spin more.

A straight fastball spins backwards. A curveball spins forwards, "the direct opposite of a fastball spin, so it's fighting the air to go down." Aha, says the clueless reporter. A curve ball is really a ball that drops, "a ball that if you had a clock, the ball would start at 12 o'clock and end up at 6."

A change-up is just that...a change in speed. "Hitters identify pitches by arm speed," explains Chris.

"If they see a full-effort fastball and the ball comes out 90 miles an hour and you throw the full effort on the next pitch and the ball comes out 75 miles per hour, it's tough for them to handle." The trick is, "You hold it such a way that it comes out slower."

A slider is a rather mystifying pitch. "I never threw one," he says, adding, "it's basically like throwing a football or turning the radio up on a dial." But he cautions that the hand should not twist.

"Kids try to do that but typically wind up hurting their arms." The effect is "if they lifted up a manhole cover up halfway, and it was at an angle it would hit like a deflector shield and take a right...a hard pitch." Using the analogy of the clock again, a slider starts at the center of the dial and suddenly dives towards 5.

The hardest pitch to hit, and to catch, is a knuckle ball. "A knuckleballer's hand does like a parachute when they throw it; they're shot putting a baseball," explains Chris. "It is a



Above, Haney and his catcher do a victory dance after shutting out Oakland in Kansas City. At left, top photo, Haney demonstrates a "four seam" fastball. His index and middle fingers have contact with four seams. Left bottom, On a "two seam" fastball, his fingers have less contact with the seams; the ball does not spin as much.

Left photos by Phil Audibert

very difficult pitch to throw and virtually impossible to hit when it's working." And therein lies the problem. "Playing catch with those guys, you can't even catch them. You'll be standing there and the ball will hit you in the neck, shin, it's just dancing, no rhyme or reason." Chris makes the point, "The limit on those guys is the ability of the catcher. If it's really working, it's hard on everybody... the umpire's getting hit; the catcher's getting hit."

Catchers are the other half of this equation, and pitchers work hard to build cooperative relationships with them. "You can't go out there and be on two different pages. You need to be in a rhythm and for the game to flow," cautions Chris. "I tended to excel when I threw to certain catchers, and I really struggled when I threw to others."

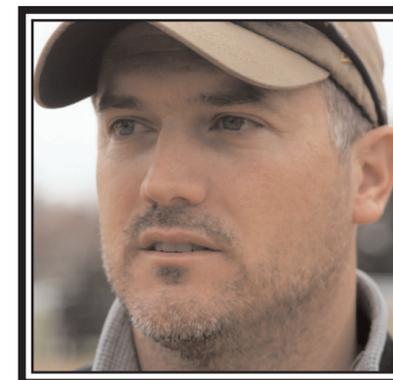
Haney says studying the hitters and watching film is a big part of the job. He doesn't watch much baseball on TV, "but I would watch ESPN if the team that I was going to pitch next was on to see who was hot and who wasn't, because baseball is a series of ebbs and flows, guys are hot, guys are cold. There's times when you

face a ball player and you can just go after him and be aggressive and they're not going to handle you, and then there's other times where you can throw a bowling ball on the ground and they're going to drive it over the fence."

So, when Chris Haney faced Ken Griffey, Jr. that day he pitched a complete game shutout, he was not particularly intimidated. "You realize that they put their pants on the same way I do, although on the other side of the coin you realize that their level is somewhat higher than most," he says with a shrug. "If you're competitive the drive is there. You probably want to beat him more than beat the guy previous or behind him. Guys like Ken Griffey, you know how you've got to pitch them. It's almost easier sometimes to go with a plan with those guys because you're more aware of what they can do."

Baseball is our national past time. The sound of the cracking bat is as much a harbinger of springtime as the blooming forsythia.

For Chris Haney it was his life for 20-plus years. It still is. "I still get a kick just playing softball in Charlottesville."



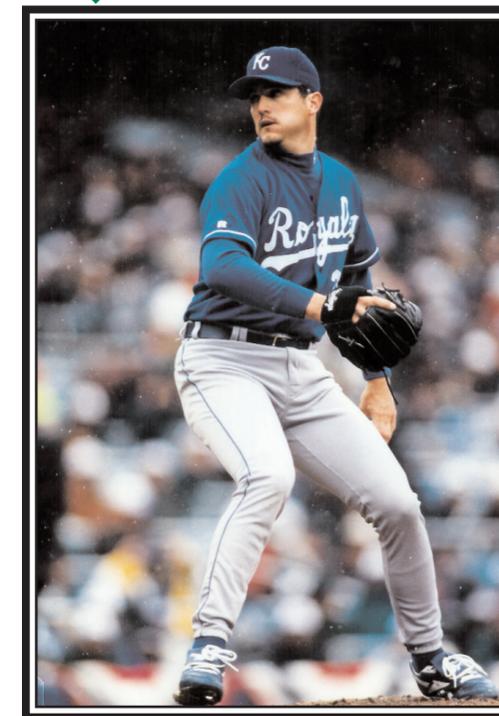
ROUNDING THIRD, HEADED FOR HOME

It happened sometime during the summer between his junior and senior year at Orange County High School. Chris Haney went from being a 130-pound skinny kid to a muscular 170-pound young man. He added 10 miles per hour to his fastball, "literally overnight." And something else happened...upstairs, in his head. He had sharper focus. He had a goal. He knew what he wanted to be...a big league baseball player.

"Something just clicked. I just matured," says a poised and articulate Haney from his living room couch in Barbourville. "It was fun." A faraway look comes into his eyes as he remembers that "dream year" when he led the 1987 Hornet baseball team, a bunch of kids who had played ball together since Little League in Gordonsville, to the state championships. "We lost one game. We lost the last game we played," he says without a hint of bitterness.

That year is a fond memory for Haney. It was also the last year he spent at home in Barbourville until just recently. In between time, Chris Haney took a wild ride around the bases in the world of Major League Baseball.

One might make the argument that baseball, as a career, would be a no-brainer for anyone named Haney in Barbourville. "We have it in our blood,"



Top photos, Chris Haney looks out at the southwest mountains from the deck of the new home he's building on land that's been in his family since 1912.

Photos by Phil Audibert

At left, Haney pitching in a snow storm in Yankee Stadium on New York's opening day in 1996. Chris remembers the shortstop wore a ski mask, the second baseman had gloves on both hands. "It snowed hard all day. It was freezing."

"I look at this as the hallowed ground of my family. I don't plan on going anywhere."

confirms Chris.

His uncle, G.L. Haney pitched for the New York Yankees organization until "he blew his arm out." And to this day, Chris says G.L. was the big baseball talent in the family. "The things he did in high school, the things he did in pro ball, people still talk about." And then there's Mike Cabbage, a cousin, who played for the Twins. And of course Chris's two brothers, Kevin and Keith who played Division I college ball.

In fact, Chris's dad, Larry Haney is still at it. He played 12 years and coached 14, most of it for the Brewers organization. "It's been his last year for the past two years now," says Chris shaking his head. "He missed watching us grow up and play and I think he really misses watching his only grandchild play. He's been away from home a long time."

Larry never pushed his sons into baseball. "His goal was not for us to play baseball. He was very clear from the time we were young that he would support us in whatever we wanted to do as long as whatever we did, we did 100 percent."

Like become a "top gun" jet fighter pilot. Chris, with his Tom Cruise good looks, flashes that 'aw shucks' grin and admits, "for the longest time I wanted to fly jets." He probably would've been great at it, and in fact, was even recruited by the Naval Academy. But that meant six years of service in the Navy after graduation, and Chris Haney with a left-handed fastball that was gaining speed every day, knew he couldn't wait that long.

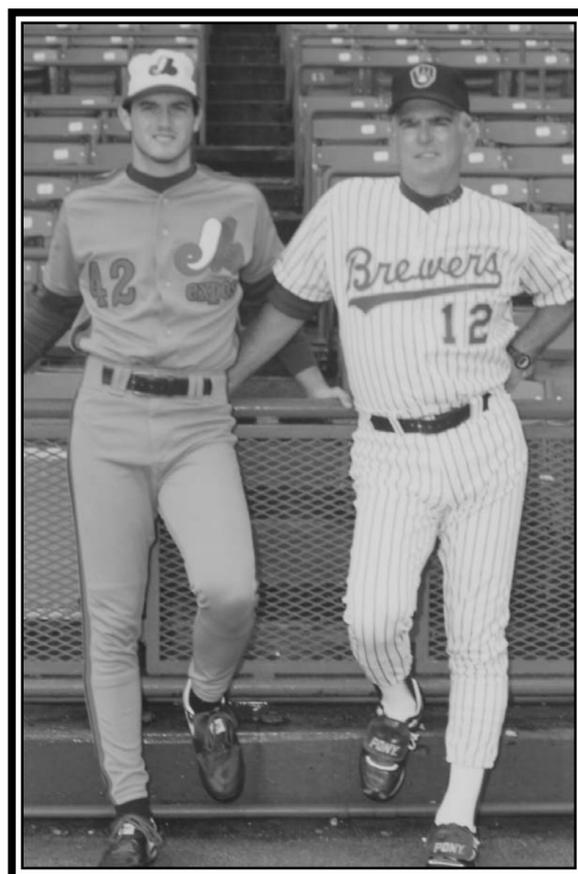
Being State Player of the Year in 1987 helped his scholarship prospects. He packed his stuff for a full ride at UNC-Charlotte, majored in economics and played ball. It was here that he met Tracy who became his wife and later, mother to their now eight-year-old son, Jake.

Chris was 35 credit hours away from a degree when the Montreal Expos called him during the second round draft in 1990. Off he went to play in rookie leagues in New York, Illinois and Florida. "I never really unpacked," he remembers of that first year. "That was the first time I was actually getting a salary. I was getting paid to play a game I loved." His monthly check...\$850.

Thinking back on his career, of the years when that paycheck was considerably more, Haney echoes what a few older players have refreshingly said, "I just had fun playing. They paid us to play a game that we would have played for free. The money is just a nice perk."

Chris rose rapidly through the Expos organization. And when he stepped out onto a major league ballpark as a player for the first time, he was awestruck but not intimidated by the experience. He had been around baseball ever since he could remember, had gone to spring training as a small child with his Dad, had shagged balls for him during Brewers batting practice, had been a bat boy.

"But when you finally get there as a player it's a really, really



Dressed in his Expos rookie uniform, Chris Haney posed with his Dad, Larry Haney for a Brewers publicity shot. Larry Haney has been with the Brewers organization since 1977.

good feeling," he confirms. "I had spent a whole lot more time on a field than most of the guys who are there for the first time. So, I wasn't blown away by the crowd; I wasn't blown away by the atmosphere. But actually being on the field and having your name on the scoreboard and being announced, yeah, it obviously takes it to an unimaginable level."

His first start in 1991 was against the 1990 champion Cincinnati Reds. "So I was facing the same lineup that had just won the World Series." He smiles ruefully. "It didn't take me long to settle in. I think the third hitter hit a two-run homerun off me and it was a gradual downhill slide from there." He laughs.

The following year, Chris was traded to the Royals and Kansas City became home for the next six years. In 1997, the



"I'm the third vote and I'm going one way or the other it seems on every issue. I've dealt with pressure my whole life so the pressure doesn't bother me; it just bothers me that coming from a team atmosphere we can't all seem to look at the bigger picture and vote the issue versus the person. There are 4,800 reasons we have to vote."

Haneys bought a home in KC, "which typically winds up being the curse of death... when you decide to buy a house, you get traded." And that's exactly what happened the next year; Chris was traded to the Cubs, then to Cleveland, then to Boston. He finished up his career as a reliever in 2002. Throughout all of this, Tracy followed him. "She has been very patient," says a grateful Chris.

Chris Haney's best season was 1996 when he played in 35 games. His favorite memory from that year was the time he pitched a complete game shutout against Randy Johnson, 2-0, striking out Ken Griffey, Jr. to win the game.

He also pitched a complete game shutout in Yankee Stadium. "Those are hallowed grounds," he says reverently. "When you do something like that, it's awesome, but it's where you are. You warm up in the bullpen and there are these busts out there of Babe Ruth and Mantle and Gehrig...just to remind you who played here. Whenever you pitch there it's pretty cool, but to throw a shutout there was really neat."

Other fond memories include playing for the USA team in Cuba. "We played five or six games over there and got our butts kicked every game in front of 50,000 people," he laughs, adding that Cuba was like living in a time warp. "It was surreal...turn back the clock 30 years."

There are some memories that are not so fond, such as the injuries that plagued and eventually claimed his career. He had already torn ligaments in his left hand that required surgery, and "I really lost my curve ball for a long, long time." He suffered a stress fracture in his shin, a herniated disc in his back. But what really nailed him... "I was goofing around shagging batting practice in Toronto and jumped up on the wall and pretty much destroyed my left ankle." After two months of rehab, "I came back and pitched on a broken ankle that hadn't healed. I hurt my left arm from throwing on a broken ankle, not being able to push."

He pauses and adds somberly, "My elbow was the thing I never came back from." An operation in 2000 never really solved the problem. Besides, his shoulder was starting to go, and "finally I decided to do something else or not do that anymore."

Chris and Tracy moved back to Virginia, first to the gated

community of Glenmore in Albemarle County. "The country boy in me just didn't fit in well with that neighborhood. I really wanted to come back here," he points to the living room couch with the two Boston Terriers in Barboursville. But the Glenmore house sold so fast, they had to make a quick move and so relocated to Tracy's hometown of Charlotte where Chris played a lot of golf and tried to finish up his old economics degree. About three weeks into the semester, the phone rang, much as it rang almost 20 years prior when the Expos called him away from college.



During his senior season at Orange County High School, Chris Haney pitched 73.1 innings for the Hornets, racking up 162 strikeouts and posting a 0.00 earned run average for the 19-1 varsity baseball team. Haney finished with an 11-0 record and a team-leading .472 batting average.

Review file photo

It was Whit McNeely of Allied Concrete, offering Chris a job in sales in Orange. "There's a lot of things that I've been offered away from here," says Chris confidently, "but I have no desire to do anything away from here...none. I'm not going to be away from here. It's just that simple." The job offer was perfect.

And so, Chris Haney rounded third and came home...home to stay. He's currently building his dream house on land his great grandfather bought in 1912. He has jumped headfirst into the community. He coaches his son's Little League team

in Gordonsville, which he loves. "The way they've set it up over there, keeping the parents in the outfield, I think is just wonderful for the kids. I know parents complain about it; they say they're so far away from the game they can't see it. But, it never fails, wherever you go, if you let parents behind the plate they'll be yelling at the kids or yelling at the umpire or yelling at coaches, and it just doesn't happen in Gordonsville."

Chris is also president of the new Babe Ruth League in Orange County. "I'm trying to get it going again," he says with determination. "We had to make a decision whether to try to revamp a broken system or just try to start from scratch; we're starting from scratch."

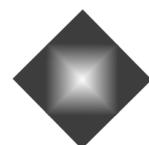
Tryouts were held last Sunday, and he's looking for help. "It's always a challenge to find people to be involved, to volunteer." He hopes to field five or six teams that will play and practice at several different county ball fields in Gordonsville, Orange, and Mine Run. "I want people to believe in this system," he says passionately.

And then there's the School Board. Claiming no political aspirations, Haney says the reason he ran last fall was "I wanted to be engaged somehow." Citing the "the ram-it-down-your-throat method that was taken," by some county leaders several years ago, Haney says, "We have to listen."

On the School Board, he finds himself smack dab in the middle of a frequently divided board and a controversial new school superintendent. "I jumped on a hand grenade," he says wide-eyed, adding "I'm the third vote and I'm going one way or the other it seems on every issue. I've dealt with pressure my whole life so the pressure doesn't bother me; it just

bothers me that coming from a team atmosphere we can't all seem to look at the bigger picture and vote the issue versus the person." He looks to the ceiling and does some math in his head. "There are 4,800 reasons we have to vote."

Chris walks out on the deck of the new house he's building and looks at the familiar outline of the southwestern mountains. "When you build on something like that, you don't want to be the one that said I had to sell it. I look at this as the hallowed ground of my family. I don't plan on going anywhere."



**Chris Haney's
Major League Baseball
career statistics
1991-2002**

Wins

38

Losses

52

**Earned Run
Average**

5.07

Games

196

Games Started

125

**Complete
Games**

8

Shutouts

4

Saves

1

Innings Pitched

824.2

Hits

924

Bases on Balls

286

Strikeouts

442