

Dynamic duo

Knuckling Niekros knocking 'em dead

LANSING, Ohio — The baseball season begins with Mrs. Henrietta "Ivy" Niekro, who displayed had written on it: "200th win, they are as much as they are mine. My love to always, Phil, May 1, 1979, ages 5, Pirates 2."

The ball is one of the most prized possessions of Mrs. Niekro and her husband, Phil Sr., parents of the National League's winningest pitcher, knuckler Phil of the Atlanta Braves and Joe of the Houston Astros, both of whom are closing in on 20-win seasons.

Phil got his first win and his first home run at Pittsburgh," said Mrs. Niekro. "I was there for both of them and he gave me both balls."

Lansing, a small mining community nestled in the heart of the Ohio valley, is little more than an hour's drive from Pittsburgh. It is where Niekro brothers and their older brother, Phyllis, grew up in modest surroundings, dominated by love — baseball.

"We're a close family," said Mrs. Niekro. "Phil always kisses his dad and me. We're not mushy, but he is just something about it."

He kissed us once after a game in Pittsburgh and Bob Prince (the former Pirate broadcaster) came and said, "Of all the years I've coached baseball, that's the first I've ever seen a player kiss his parents."

been cut by the illness of Niekro, who underwent surgery six years ago and has since been bothered by blood clots.

Niekro, who spent 18 years working in the mines and a year as an auto worker in Detroit before returning to Lansing, was a top sandlot pitcher in his younger days.

In fact, it was he who taught young Phil how to throw the knuckler at the tender age of 8.

"I had a good arm, but nothing up here," said Niekro, pointing to his head, "that's why I ruined it. The main thing for kids to learn is how to take care of their arm."

He went to the mound after some of his former sandlot teammates, including George Butch, who still visits the elder Niekro almost daily, complained their then first baseman burned their hands when he threw the ball around the infield.

"When it came to good arms," said Butch, "they (Phil and Joe) couldn't carry his glove."

"We told him, 'if you want to throw that hard, get on the mound,'" said Anthony Niekro, a cousin of Phil Sr. and another former teammate. "Once he got there, he was a pitcher from then on."

After injuring his arm, Phil Sr. learned the knuckler from a former local minor league player, although he admitted, "I never used it much."

time I've rubbed my boys down," said Mrs. Niekro.

Although Phil, who makes his winter home in Atlanta, and Joe, who resides in Lakeland, Fla., in the offseason, don't get home often, they still make the short jaunt from Pittsburgh when their teams are playing the Pirates — usually bringing a carload of teammates for some of their mom's ethnic cooking.

"The last time, Joe brought five of them," said Mrs. Niekro. "I'm waiting for Phil to bring Ted Turner (owner of the Braves). Maybe he'll leave a tip on the table."

But money isn't important to the Niekros.

"Money doesn't mean a thing if you don't have your health," said Mr. Niekro. "Your health is your wealth."

"Talk about the depression," said Mrs. Niekro. "Our boys didn't have a car until they were in the major leagues."

Although the 1979 baseball season has been a good one for all the Niekros, Mrs. Niekro, a seemingly unperurbable gray-haired woman with an ever-present smile, had one bone to pick — with Tom Lasorda, manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

You see, Lasorda also was the National League All-Star manager and son Joe, making the All-Star team for the first time, didn't get to pitch.

"Just say I'm very unhappy that Joe didn't get into the All-Star Game," she said, biting her lip to keep from saying more. "The whole valley is. I had one 85-year-old lady call me and say she stayed up to

midnight just to see Joe pitch."

But Mrs. Niekro's baseball season is likely to end well, with Phil and Joe becoming the first brother combination to win 20 games since Jim and Gaylord Perry in 1970.

"I'm just praying for two 20-game seasons," said Mrs. Niekro. "I'm thinking of taking some holy water to Pittsburgh."

"I just thank God that our chil-

dren turned out so good," said Mrs. Niekro. "I've always told them to have respect for everybody and they all do. They have never said an unkind word to us."

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Although there is no longer the racing from one game to another as the boys perform, baseball takes up much of the Niekros' lives.

They usually got two radios going the time," said Mrs. Niekro. "If I can't get the Atlanta and Boston games in here, I go out in my car. I'll listen to some game just get the scores."

"When baseball season is over," said Mrs. Niekro, "we don't have anything to do."

The elder Niekros used to attend many games as possible when their sons played in such cities as Pittsburgh, Detroit, Cincinnati, Chicago or Atlanta.

But in recent years, the trips have

But he knew enough about it to teach it to young Phil, who lost only two games during his career at Bridgeport High School, one of them to Bill Mazeroski and his Warren Consolidated team, and was signed during a Milwaukee Braves tryout camp at nearby Bellaire.

"The kids used to be sitting there beside the house with their gloves when Phil (Sr.) got home from the mine," said Mrs. Niekro. "He would be so dirty that all you could see was his eyes, but he would play catch with them."

But that wasn't the only parental help the boys got. They also had their own trainer.

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