

Knuckleball! - A Documentary Movie Review

As someone who's seen a lot of Tim Wakefield over the years as a Boston Red Sox fan, it's probably not a surprise that I was extremely excited to find a 2012 sports documentary called "Knuckleball!" on Netflix. I'd vaguely heard about it when it first released in 2012, but I finally saw it in 2014. It follows the stories of pitchers Tim Wakefield (RIP), who pitched from 1992 to 2011, and R.A. Dickey. The latter pitcher became one of the best come-back stories in baseball history and was still pitching for the Toronto Blue Jays when this movie released.

With its high production values and sharp directing, it's easy to agree with the [Knuckleball documentary's Rotten Tomatoes rating of 94%](#), one extremely high for any movie, even among documentaries. IMDB only gave this production a 7/10 rating, but clearly the critics who took issues with this film weren't actual baseball fans. So, if you're a big baseball fan who knows the sport well, you'll love this film. Knuckleball! actually taught me a few things about both pitchers which I hadn't known before; considering my deep knowledge of the sport's history, this came as a pleasant surprise to me. It was well-directed and well-produced.

I've always been a huge fan of the knuckleball thanks to its sheer unpredictability, and it's great how the film-makers decided to focus on this aspect of the pitch. It's also a big credit to the film on also highlighting how many knuckleball pitchers never get the chances they probably deserve.

How Tim Wakefield Saved His Baseball Career With the Knuckleball

While I knew that Wakefield had his magical 1992 rookie season with the Pittsburgh Pirates, the film really put into perspective how he actually became the ace of that Pirates staff – one that wasn't bad to begin with, mind you! In 1993, he was the Pirates' Opening Day starter, also something I'd not known. Wake won the game, but walked nine batters during the process. After that outing, unfortunately, not much went right for him. Then again, the Pirates themselves weren't a very good team in 1993. In any case, Wakefield lost all confidence in his pitching ability and was sent down to the minor leagues in 1994.

In 1995, the Pirates released him, but the Red Sox immediately snapped him up. After signing with Boston, he then worked with legendary knuckle-ballers Phil Niekro (who is in the Hall of Fame) and Charlie Hough who got him back on track. Of course, the Red Sox would go on to have Wakefield on their pitching staff for 12 seasons, making at least one start in every one of those seasons.

How R.A. Dickey Beat the Odds Thanks to the Knuckleball

R.A. Dickey's story is a pretty crazy one. He was born without a UCL (ulnar collateral ligament) in his right elbow, the same ligament that pitchers have replaced with Tommy John surgery. But, he'd never had a problem with pitching despite this freak physical oddity. Dickey was a first-round draft pick by the Texas Rangers. But, after the discovery of his lack of a UCL, the team reduced their signing bonus from around \$800,000 to only \$75,000.

Dickey still signed, accepting the reduced bonus, and set off on quite the journey with his wife and three kids. He did end up making the Major Leagues, but bounced around a lot. Despite living the Major League dream, he didn't live up to his first-round billing with his performance. So, in 2005, he became a knuckle-ball pitcher full-time.

Unfortunately, it was too late for Dickey in the Rangers organization, who let him go. However, several other teams gave him another chance. He made a lot of different stops after the Rangers let him go, most of them in the minor leagues, but resurfacing in the Bigs with the Twins and Mariners. In both MLB stops, he wasn't incredibly effective.

The New York Mets Gamble on R.A. Dickey's Knuckleball and Win

In 2010, the Mets were yet another organization willing to take a chance on Dickey and his knuckleball, yet was one of the first cuts of spring training. However, the Mets were willing to keep him around at Triple-A, an assignment he accepted. Then, after Dickey wound up pitching a one-hit shutout at Triple-A, the Mets called him up and he became the ace of their pitching staff that season.

In 2011, though, things started off rough as nagging injuries began to get to him. Fortunately, Dickey was now playing on a guaranteed two-year contract he'd signed before the season, so he was safe from being sent down to the minor leagues. Late in the season, he visited Charlie Hough in LA who taught him about changing speeds with his knuckle-ball. After this major adjustment, Dickey was practically unhittable for quite a while. In 2012, he would go on to win the National League Cy Young Award and a contract extension. (The contract extension would be signed after the documentary was made.)

With Dickey at the height of his baseball fame, the film actually ends with Tim Lincecum's February 2012 retirement. It's a shame that Knuckleball wasn't made a bit later, because it would've chronicled Dickey's Cy Young season, as well. But, as you can't blame it for being made when it was, it's a fantastic documentary. The timing really was meant to coincide with Lincecum's retirement and how Dickey has to "carry the torch" so to speak, as he inevitably would for awhile.

What is the Future for Knuckleball Pitchers?

The film does mention knuckleballer Stephen Wright who was still on the Boston Red Sox 40-man roster for a few years, and Wakefield continued to work with him for quite some time. (Wright would end up running into off-the-field issues and was released in 2019.) They also mentioned how the Orioles had a couple knuckleballers in their minor league system, one of whom would eventually appear in the Majors in 2021 ([Mickey Jannis](#)). (After this article was written, a couple other knuckleballers would appear in the league, but that's for a separate piece.)

The knuckleball pitch may finally be gaining appreciation now as it never has. This film may have had something to do with it. *Knuckleball!* does a great job of balancing the two knuckleball pitchers' stories while also showing the fraternity that knuckleballers have. As an athletic feat, the knuckleball is a unique thing in sports, and when it works in getting batters out, it's a ton of fun to watch. The knuckleball may be baseball's most devastating pitch when it's floating free and getting swings and misses. You just have to trust in it for it to do its job.

Hopefully, we once again see the rise of yet another knuckleball pitcher. As of 2022, though, another Wakefield or Dickey has not yet arisen. In 2023, Mickey Jannis is still kicking around independent league baseball. Fortunately, San Diego Padres minor league pitcher Matt Waldron toyed with a knuckleball for a couple years in the minors, and finally enjoyed some success in 2024 with the big league team! In any case, even with the focus on throwing harder and developing pitches with consistency, the knuckleball hasn't been forever relegated to history just yet!

~ Amelia Desertsong