



Charlie Zink's unique grip includes the nail of his middle finger dug into the baseball. The pitch has salvaged his career.

## Getting a grip on the knuckler

### • HOW IT WORKS

The pitcher grips the ball with his fingertips or knuckles, which prevents the ball from rotating as it would normally. The drag created by the stitches on the ball make it flutter and curve as it heads to the plate.

### • DISADVANTAGES

Because of its movement, the pitch is difficult for pitchers to control, catchers to catch, hitters to hit and for umpires to rule a ball or strike. A knuckler that fails to move is nothing more than a 65 mph batting practice toss.

### • FAMOUS KNUCKLEBALLERS

Eddie Cicotte  
Hoyt Wilhelm  
Charlie Hough  
Phil Niekro  
Joe Niekro  
Wilbur Wood  
Tim Wakefield

PHOTO COURTESY OF KELLY O'CONNOR

# Rescued by the KNUCKLEBALL

RED SOX PROSPECT NOW JUST WAITS FOR CALL UP

BY JOSHUA ROBINSON  
The New York Times

Feature

PAWTUCKET, Rhode Island – Six years after throwing his first knuckleball as a professional – the first of several to hit a batter in the head – Charlie Zink has come to terms with his rare and maddening skill. He accepts that all he can do is aim at his catcher's face mask, throw as slowly as he can and hope for the best.

"I'm a knuckleballer now," Zink, a 28-year-old right-hander, said at the home of the Pawtucket Red Sox, Boston's Triple-A affiliate. "That's what I am; that's just what I have to be."

At first, it was something he had only seen on television, a pitch to fool around with. Then it became a magnet for attention, his ticket to the big leagues. But it was also his undoing.

Throwing at 65 mph, Zink viewed his arm as a music box that he could wind up and play at any time. After

a breakout season in 2003, when he was named the Red Sox's minor league pitcher of the year, he developed a cocksure attitude, a casual work ethic and eventually tendinitis in his right shoulder that effectively cost him the next season. Now, after a couple of years of maturing and mesmerizing hitters, Zink and his knuckleball are on the cusp of the majors.

"It was good for me to fail," he said. "I had so much success, I didn't think I had to do anything. I was immature. I was going out all the time. I figured I could just throw up a knuckleball, and no one would be able to hit it."

#### TOTAL TURNAROUND

Zink is 8-2 for the PawSox with a 2.14 earned run average, far better than his 1-10 season in 2004. He said there had already been talk of promotion three times this year.

Two weeks ago, his schedule was altered so he was pitching on the same days Tim Wakefield was. And with the Red Sox possibly in pursuit of the In-

dians' C.C. Sabathia, Zink could prove a valuable trading chip.

"That knuckleball that he has, he can pitch in the big leagues right now," Pawtucket's pitching coach, Rich Sauveur, said.

Sauveur, who joined the PawSox this season, can help Zink from experience. In 1986, his knuckleball carried him to three major league starts before he became a conventional reliever. And it was Sauveur who realized that Zink's fastball simply would not do as a backup pitch.

The 95-mph fastball he threw in college now tops out in the low 80s. So earlier this season, Sauveur suggested he use a changeup. Zink wondered what exactly he would be changing up, but he soon took his coach's advice. In his last start, in which he allowed one run and six hits in seven and two-thirds innings, Zink threw 104 pitches, 73 for strikes. He struck out five.

"It's different, because now I have an idea of what I'm doing out there," Zink said. "In '03, I really was just get-

ting lucky. When I was throwing balls, I didn't know how to correct it."

During that 2003 season, he allowed 144 hits in 175 1/3 innings for Single-A Sarasota and Double-A Portland, earning a spot on Baseball America's list of top-50 prospects.

"I got into the mind-set where people were telling me that just because I was a knuckleball pitcher, I didn't have to work out because I wasn't throwing hard," he said. "That's what messed me up. The year I came back, I didn't work out at all."

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CHARLIE ZINK

How Zink was even in a position to throw away a shot at the big leagues is a story he delivers the way he offers up his pitches, slowly and full of twists.

Zink had always thought his sport was taekwondo. By age 11, he was teaching classes, and at 12, he was a second-degree black belt. But when he realized he could not earn his third-degree belt until 16, he turned to baseball.

It was then, while watching Wakefield on television, that he began playing with the knuckleball. He then squirreled it away until 2002.

In the meantime, Zink became a

traditional reliever.

During his only season at Sacramento City College, he was spotted by Luis Tiant, the great Red Sox pitcher. Tiant said in a telephone interview that he saw Zink as a pitcher with a solid changeup and enough heat to be useful at his Division III program at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia.

So Zink transferred there for his sophomore year. Without any exposure, he went undrafted in 2001 and was about ready to give up.

#### THE RED SOX CALL

But Tiant, his coach and golf partner, got him a tryout with the Red Sox. He had not picked up a baseball in four months, but he made the trip to Fort Myers, Florida.

He said they told him, "OK, we'll give you a call."

He had heard that before. But two weeks later, the Red Sox invited him to spring training without any promises. He signed on April 1, 2002.

Zink was decent out of the bullpen that season with Single-A Augusta and with Sarasota of the Single-A Advanced Florida State League.

He threw the knuckleball a few times in games before he got to camp, where his trainer asked to see the pitch. The trainer's shattered sunglasses were the punch line to that story.

"And that was it," Zink said. "I was done being a regular pitcher."

But while Zink continues to thrive as a knuckleballer, the Red Sox have told his agent that Jason Varitek is slated to catch four of every five games, with Kevin Cash on staff primarily to catch Wakefield.

"It's frustrating to know that because of what I do, I can only replace one guy up there," Zink said. "And he's doing pretty well."