

Hall of Fame

That's the Nasty Boy

Rob Dibble is baseball's bad boy, radio's golden tongue, and Southington's pride

By JOHN GORALSKI
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A gathering of Blue Knight baseball players stood at the door in the basement of Southington High School, watching a young Rob Dibble speed through the hallways. His shirt dripped with perspiration. His breath came in short gasps. The young Knights returned to the field for more practice.

Former Blue Knight coach John Fontana remembers Dibble's training as he climbed his way up through the minor leagues because it was a turning point of sorts in Fontana's Blue Knights. The coach welcomed Dibble back to train, and he watched it influence his players like ripples in a pool.



SUBMITTED

Athlete

Rob "Nasty Boy" Dibble continues to be known for his work in baseball.

"When he'd come back to work out at the high school, the kids knew he was in the big leagues and saw the way he worked out," Fontana said. "It rubbed off. From then on, I never had to tell kids to go lift weights or do anything... They saw him do it, and they knew he got there. 'Maybe this is what we should be doing.'"

More than 20 year later, the Dibble remembers those workouts. "I scared the heck out of a lot of people down there while I was working out," he said with a laugh. "I was very blessed. I always had a place to work out and come back to. It kept me grounded and always made me work harder. You run in the halls after school, and you watch those other kids. The wrestlers are running around there. The basketball players are practicing, and that was huge for me."

Dibble may be one of the best known and least understood players to come out of Southington High School. He's been praised, at times, as one of the best in Major League Baseball. He's been criticized, at other times, for his antics. After his playing career, he stayed at the center of debates as a radio and television analyst.

The one thing that everyone can agree upon is that Dibble is one of the hardest working people in sports. He still holds two or three jobs, plays in three soft-ball leagues, and spends time with his family, with his third child on the way. Hard work pays off, and Dibble is the perfect example.

Fontana remembers talking to the late Chief Bender, a Cincinnati scout, who first discovered Dibble in the minors. Bender watched Dibble pitch a night game and tried to catch him afterwards at his apartment. The scout's knock on the door at 1 a.m. went unanswered, and Bender began to think the worst. Then a

sweat-drenched Dibble came bounding down the stairwell with a towel and a grin. "He told Bender that, with the road trip, he hadn't been able to do his running," said Fontana. "So he went out to do it after the game. Bender gave him the ticket right away and put him on the plane the next day. It's the little things that move you to the next level, and people may not know that."

Dibble credits his hometown as the source of his work ethic. His father worked two and three jobs. His brothers challenged him endlessly in pick-up games. Dibble launched into a litany of names and places, listing all of his coaches, teammates, and friends that helped shape him during his youth. He remembered them by position and team. He even remembered a few that were better than him.

There's still a tinge of anger in his voice as he recalls a Little League draft when an 11-year-old Dibble was left standing alone as coaches picked Jean Septko to their team.

"You don't think that I ever forget that? They picked a girl ahead of me in Little League," he said. "To this day, it drives me, and that was 30-plus years ago."

People weren't picked ahead of him for long. By the time he reached the high school, Dibble had grown into one of the town's best. He played soccer to maintain his speed and used it on the diamond where he was the leadoff hitter, an outfielder, and a shortstop. In those days, he was known as much for his bat and his base running as he was for his arm.

Dibble still holds school records for triples (7) and remembers going 14-for-14 as a base-stealer in his senior season. Sports history may remember Dibble as a pitcher, but he still sees himself as just one of the guys.

"I don't fancy myself as a

pitcher, and I never have," he said. "I actually hated pitching. I was an everyday player, and I always had that mentality. Maybe people didn't understand that the way I played in the big leagues, but I played like an everyday player. I couldn't be a starter. I hated those two years in the minor leagues as a starter."

That showed in his stats because Dibble's numbers weren't that impressive in the minor. From 1983-88, he pitched on seven rosters. He had a 7.82 ERA his first season and dipped below a 3.0 ERA for the first time in 1988, but Dibble continued to work hard. He never gave up.

"The minor leagues aren't hard. It's about politics," he said. "It's about people liking you and giving you a break. I really believe that the harder you work, the more you have a shot to make your own break."

Finally, Dibble got his break. An off-season stint in Puerto Rico put him on an all-star roster with Ronny Gant, Roberto Alomar, and Bernie Williams. Things finally started to click, and Dibble earned a shot at the major leagues. An injured player opened a temporary position, and Dibble made the most of the opportunity.

"When Pete Rose was the manager, he would say that I didn't pitch that well in AA so what makes me think I can pitch in the major leagues? It took me going to Puerto Rico and busting my butt down there that I thought I had a shot at this," said Dibble. "Even when I did get called up in '88, Pete Rose and the general manager Murray Cook sat me down. They told me I was there for two weeks because a guy got hurt, but in my mind there was always that little Blue Knight guy telling me that they were wrong about me. I was going to be there a lot longer than two weeks."

The Southington ace didn't give up a run in his first

nine outings, and the rest was history. He began to climb the ranks in the bullpen. On June 4, 1989, he struck out three batters in nine pitches to become just one of 41 pitchers in Major League Baseball (MLB) history to pitch a perfect, nine-pitch inning.

He earned his 500th strikeout faster (368 games) than any other pitcher in modern baseball, was named to the National League All-Star team in 1990 and 1991, and was the National League Championship Series MVP in 1990. The Reds won the World Series that year in a series sweep.

"It wasn't just about the winning. It was the stuff we did off the field. We all did it together," said Dibble. "The championship moments are fleeting, but to have six or seven months together to accomplish something is the stuff you can't take away. That's the beauty about winning a championship."

It was on that World Series roster that Dibble would first hear the name 'Nasty Boys' that has stuck with him throughout his career. Norm Charlton, Randy Myers, and Dibble formed a bullpen that was so tough in character and on the mound that the name sort of stuck. In later years, the media would link the Nasty Boy image to Dibble on the field, but the pitcher said that this wasn't totally accurate. He is competitive, and that sometimes spills over.

"It was all about the team and my role, whether I was the long man, the short man, or a closer," he said. "It wasn't about what my final numbers would be. I was just embarrassed when I gave up a hit. I just snapped when I gave up a hit. I felt like I was a failure. Giving up a game-winning homerun was an enormous failure because guys worked their butts off to get me in the game at that point. I didn't want to choke."

On the other hand, the moniker helped open doors in broadcasting once shoulder surgeries ended his playing days. Over the years, Dibble has served as a baseball analyst and co-host on television and radio. He served as the color man for the Washington Nationals and currently hosts the show 'First Pitch' on XM Radio 175 and Sirius 210.

Fans were drawn in by the bigger-than-life Nasty Boy image, but Dibble credits his long-lasting appeal to his Southington work-ethic.

"The Nasty Boy thing kind of gets you in the door, but the hard work keeps you there," he said. "It's kind of like the big leagues. It's easy to make it there and get a shot at the big leagues. It's hard to stay. It's not easy. Every day's a fight for your baseball life at the major league level. Anybody who

Southington Sports Hall of Fame



Inside the Numbers

SOUTHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL

- Played baseball and soccer (1979-82)
- Tied school record for single season triples (5 in 1981)
- School record for career triples (7 from 1979-1982)
- Team captain, MVP (1982)
- All conference (1981, 1982)
- All-State (1982)
- Senior all-star game (1982)

HITTING STATISTICS

- 1981—.333 Batting Average
- 1982—.376 Batting Average

PITCHING STATISTICS

- 1981—(7-1 record) 89.6 IP, 31 BB, 84 K, 57 H, 46 R, 25 ER.
- 1982—(7-2 record) 65.0 IP, 18 BB, 84 K, 26 H, 13 R, 2 ER.

MINOR LEAGUE PITCHING

Year	Team	G	W	L	SV	IP	ERA	BB	SO
1983	Billings	5	0	1	0	12.2	7.82	11	7
	Eugene	7	3	2	0	37.2	5.73	18	17
1984	Tampa	15	5	2	0	64.2	2.92	29	39
1985	C.Rapids	45	5	5	12	65.2	3.84	29	73
1986	Vermont	31	3	2	10	55.1	3.09	28	37
	Denver	5	1	0	0	6.2	5.40	2	3
1987	Nashville	44	2	4	4	61.0	4.72	27	51
1988	Nashville	31	2	1	13	35.0	2.31	14	41
TOTALS		183	21	17	39	338.2	3.93	158	268

•MLB Supplemental Draft in Jan 1983

MLB PITCHING

Year	Team	G	W	L	SV	IP	ERA	BB	SO
1988	CIN	37	1	1	0	59.1	1.82	21	59
1989	CIN	74	10	5	2	99.0	2.09	39	141
1990	CIN	68	8	3	11	98.0	1.74	34	136
1991	CIN	67	3	5	31	82.1	3.17	25	124
1992	CIN	63	3	5	25	70.1	3.07	31	110
1993	CIN	45	1	4	19	41.2	6.48	42	49
1995		31	1	2	1	26.1	7.18	46	26
CAREER		385	27	25	89	477.0	2.98	238	645

•1990 World Series Championship team

- National League All-Star (1990, 1991)
- NLCS MVP (1990)

Broadcasting

- Host of 'First Pitch' (XM Radio 175/Sirius 210)
- FoxSports.com video host 'Around the Bases.'
- Co-host for Fox Sports radio Sunday night.
- Former ESPN baseball analyst, co-host of 'The Best Damn Sports Show Period', and color voice of the Washington Nationals on MASN.

tells you differently is lying."

Dibble said that his heart has never strayed too far from his high school field. With two brothers in town, a sister and mother in nearby Bristol, and a close connection to friends and family, Dibble has kept in touch with local happenings. Fontana said that Dibble has remained active as an anonymous donor to local projects.

"I never asked Rob or Carl [Pavano] for anything. I figured that they gave me enough with what they've done for the program," Fontana said. "When I fundraised, they were never asked for anything, but if Rob read in a paper that we were putting in a sprinkler system or building a batting cage, I would get a \$500 check from him and his wife. He'd have a note that would say if we were still short at the end of our fundraising, come see him. But don't tell anybody. I can't say how many times he contributed, and we never asked. It was just something that he would do to give back to the program."

Dibble said that he raised both of his older kids in the area and hopes to

return after the birth of his next child. Southington is a big part of his identity.

"People will always tell you that you're from CT or from Southington and you won't make it. That drives me to this day. It never left me," said Dibble. "All the other stuff is work and a job and fun, but I'll always be from Southington, and I'll always be a part of it."

It was no surprise to fans when selection committee members announced Dibble as an inaugural member of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, Dibble will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf. He doesn't take the award lightly.

"It always comes as a surprise, and it's always an honor," he said. "I always carried Southington with me as a player, whether it was from Brian Danko picking me as an 11-year-old for the Kiwanis in Western Little League all the way up to Coach Fontana. There were a lot of people that helped me get to where I was, so anytime that you get an individual accolade, I don't take any of that stuff for granted."