



Although Tom Candiotti, who visits Nat Bailey Stadium on April 29 as part of the 2023 Toyota Superstar Series, is known first and foremost for his knuckleball, the Walnut Creek, CA, native actually has a place in Canadian baseball lore as well.

TOM CANDIOTTI: A LIFE OF KNUCKLEBALLS

You see, the man known as the “Candy Man” played for three organizations north of the border during his professional baseball career, breaking into pro ball with the Victoria Mussels in 1978 and developing his knuckleball with the Vancouver Canadians in 1985. He was also a member of the 1991 American League East champion Toronto Blue Jays.

In 1991, with staff ace Dave Stieb out for an extended period of time due to a back injury—he was initially expected back after the All-Star break, but would never return the rest of the season—General Manager Pat Gillick moved quickly and acquired Candiotti from Cleveland on June 27th. Candiotti, pitching like a No. 1 pitcher, gave the Blue Jays solid outing after solid outing. While he had a losing record of 6-7 with Toronto, his 2.98 ERA was more indicative of his pitching. His 19 starts included 129.2 innings, 114 hits, 45 walks, and just six homers. He averaged over seven innings per start, adequately replacing Stieb’s innings.

Eight times over a 16-start span, Candiotti pitched shutout ball through the first seven innings of a game. In August, he threw eight innings of one-hit baseball one night in Baltimore, and tied a team record with 12 strikeouts over seven innings versus Detroit, proving he wasn’t fazed by the pressure of pitching in a pennant race. Erase back-to-back bad outings in late September when he suffered some rotten luck—pitching with an abscessed tooth in one game, and then getting spiked above the right ankle in his next by Minnesota’s Brian Harper—and his Blue Jays ERA would have been 2.32.

Thanks to Candiotti’s quality innings, Toronto went on to win the division. He was then rewarded with the Game One starting assignment in the American League Championship Series, getting

the nod over veteran Jimmy Key and fireballing rookie Juan Guzman. Though the Blue Jays lost the series, his 1991 season as a whole still shouldn’t be looked upon as a failure. After all, who could quibble with his major league-leading 2.23 ERA entering the final week of September?

And while it might be easy to think that Candiotti didn’t have any signature games with Toronto given the fact the team didn’t become world champions, that idea is flawed. In his 12th start as a Blue Jay, Candiotti provided a late-August thrill by pitching eight innings of one-hit ball in Baltimore, with Toronto battling Detroit in a tight pennant race.

On the morning of August 28th, Toronto held a slim one-game lead over Detroit in the AL East. The Tigers had Bill Gullickson, who had a major league-leading 16 wins, pitching that night against the last-place California Angels. The Blue Jays, meanwhile, were trying to complete a three-game sweep in Baltimore with Candiotti on the mound—but it was a tall task as Toronto had never before swept a series at Memorial Stadium. Then there were the lifetime batting averages against the Candy Man by some of the Orioles’ best hitters, as noted by the Baltimore Sun in its game-day report:

Joe Orsulak .529

Randy Milligan .444

Mike Devereaux .375

The Blue Jays had already beaten the Orioles in the first two games of the series, but surely they couldn’t complete the sweep—especially when they’d never ever done it in Baltimore coupled with the fact the O’s Nos. 1, 2, and 5 hitters practically owned

Candiotti. And with the Tigers trotting out their best pitcher against California, the assumption was that Detroit would win its game. Thus, it was very plausible that the Blue Jays and Tigers would be tied again atop the East by the end of the night.

Somehow, even with Gullickson pitching a gem—allowing just five hits while going the distance—Detroit still lost 1-0. The turning point in the Toronto-Baltimore contest, meanwhile, came in the very first inning when the Orioles threatened against Candiotti—but couldn't score.

With one out, Orsulak lined an opposite-field single off the glove of third baseman Kelly Gruber. A groundout moved Orsulak to second, before Glenn Davis walked. A passed ball moved both runners into scoring position for Milligan, one of the Candiotti killers with that .444 lifetime average. In what turned out to be the game's key at-bat, the Candy Man calmly struck Milligan out swinging on a full-count pitch to escape the jam unscathed. The Orioles got nothing else the rest of the night, as Milligan's strikeout marked the first of 22 consecutive outs recorded by Candiotti. After the walk to Davis, no other Oriole reached base.

Over eight innings on a humid night, Candiotti held Baltimore to just that one Orsulak hit. With Toronto ahead 3-0, hitting coach Gene Tenace (who served as the interim manager while Cito Gaston was recovering from back problems) sent in closer Tom Henke to begin the ninth. Henke proceeded to toss a 1-2-3 inning, completing the combined one-hitter.

Fast forward to September 23rd. Although Candiotti led the majors with a 2.23 ERA going into a start against the Angels, he had a rough outing which cost him the American League ERA crown. He would finish the season with a 2.65 ERA to Roger Clemens's league-leading 2.62.

As Candiotti explains, it had nothing to do with his knuckleball not working that night. "We were in Anaheim," Candiotti recalls. "I was pitching outstanding that whole year, pitching really great. We went into Anaheim and I was having lunch with David Wells. As I was eating lunch, I bit into a chip and I almost fell off my chair. Something happened to my tooth. I was like, 'What in the world happened?'"

"I was pitching that night. I called the trainer out to look at me when I got to the ballpark. They had to call a dentist to come down and examine me. He came in and looked at me, and he thought I cracked a tooth or something happened with the nerves. So they shot me with six shots of Novocaine in my mouth. Six shots! And they gave me some Tylenol and said, 'Go get them.' My mouth was swollen like a chipmunk."

Soon after, interim manager Gene Tenace and pitching coach Galen Cisco went into the clubhouse to check on Candiotti's status.

"Can you pitch?" they asked. The Candy Man, who could barely talk, didn't want to let his team down. "Yeah," Candiotti countered, "I can pitch. Sure."

Tenace and Cisco got what they wanted to hear. "Good, because we need you to pitch tonight."

"Okay, I'll give you everything I got."

And that was that. Candiotti was getting the ball that night. "So I threw my warm-up pitches," he recalls, "and they gave me two

more shots before I went out in the first inning. So I had eight shots altogether in my mouth. I went out there and retired the first two guys but didn't get anyone else out. Next thing you know, a couple of hits and then a bases-loaded triple and a double. And they had seven runs on the board. The next day I had to go to the dentist and, of course, have a root canal done. It was a fractured tooth. But that one game in September against the Angels cost me that ERA title because I lost it by three-hundredths of a point to Roger Clemens."

Would a pitcher today make that start to jeopardize losing the ERA title? Candiotti thinks not. "Can you imagine somebody doing that nowadays? Their agent would probably sue the organization," he says with a laugh. "Most people would've said, 'No, I can't pitch. I've just been injected eight times in the mouth.' They wouldn't have made the start. Of course I couldn't pitch. And I didn't have my normal pre game and I wasn't really ready to pitch. But back then, when you're in the pennant race and when the manager and pitching coach say, 'Hey, listen. We need you,' it was like, 'Okay, I'll give you what I got.'"

On that, his General Manager in Toronto concurs. "Tom had a tremendous work ethic," Pat Gillick says over the phone from his home in the Pacific Northwest when thinking back to Candiotti's four months with the Blue Jays. "He had a great passion for the game of baseball, and he was one of those people that, when you gave him the ball, he'd always go out there no matter what the situation might be. He was always ready to go to the mound."

"I was a tough pitcher," adds Candiotti. "So every time I was supposed to get the ball, I'd go, 'I'll give you what I got.' But I wasn't very good that night in Anaheim. It didn't have anything to do with the knuckleball. It was more me pitching all injected up."



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**TOM
CANDIOTTI**
A LIFE OF KNUCKLEBALLS

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SUPERSTAR SERIES
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