



Minor league HR king Mike Hessman finds a new groove with Whitecaps

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COMSTOCK PARK - Mike Hessman's baseball odyssey is so interesting it has even become a country music-twined song.

Hessman, who played part of his career in the Detroit Tigers' organization, hit more home runs than anyone in minor league history — 433 with 18 pro teams over 20 seasons before retiring in 2015. The total surpassed by one a record set by Buzz Arlett in 1937.

Hessman's story caught the attention of Boston-based songwriter Howie Newman who was so moved that he wrote, "The Ballad of Mike Hessman."

"The whole thing is such a dichotomy," Newman said. "It's a great thing to hit 433 home runs, that's amazing, but the irony is that it kept him in the minor leagues for so long. Sort of a double-edged sword."

Hessman is an intriguing baseball figure. All those home runs. But in the major leagues? Hessman hit only 14. The problem was contact. He whiffed 79 times in 223 at bats in stints with the Atlanta Braves, Tigers and New York Mets.

But don't cry for Hessman. He's OK with his place in baseball lore.

"I embrace it, but I don't talk much about it unless someone brings it up," he said. "I was extremely blessed to be able to play the game that long."

Now in his first year as hitting coach for the West Michigan Whitecaps, Hessman, 39, still looks imposing at 6-foot-4 and 215 pounds. But he's disarming with the home run topic and the inevitable "what if?"



Mike Hessman

"It was never something that I set out to do and planned to do," Hessman said. "But that's just the way the cards fell and that's OK. I was very fortunate."

Newman, meanwhile, released "The Ballad of Mike Hessman" in late December. It includes the lyrics:

"He just kept playing 'cause he loved it,
Living out his dream
Playing baseball for a living ever since he was 18
The years flew by just like the wind
He never lost that thirst
Becoming minor league home run king
Was a blessing and curse"

Newman, who has written about baseball players before, recalled reading a story about Hessman in Sports Illustrated and found him a perfect subject for a song.

"When I read that, I just thought it was amazing," he said.

Of course, Hessman has heard it. Newman sent him a copy a couple weeks ago.

"Yeah, I was going through some fan mail and there was this CD and a note from him saying, 'Hey man, I wrote this song about you. Tell me what you think,'" Hessman said.

So?

"I enjoyed it," Hessman said with a chuckle.

"Obviously, for someone to write a song about you is pretty cool. So I really appreciate that."

Before offering that a movie deal is next, remember Hessman's role has really already been played. He is Crash Davis from "Bull Durham."

Except Hessman has his own song.