

## Hunter, James "Catfish" <sup>[1]</sup>

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### James "Catfish" Hunter

by Steven Case, 2010.

NC Government & Heritage Library.

**April 8, 1946 - September 9, 1999**

The story of James Augustus Hunter reads like a Hollywood script. Born the last of eight children in [Perquimans County](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, North Carolina, Jim Hunter rose to superstar status in baseball while maintaining his down home North Carolina character. Better known as "Catfish", Hunter achieved an impressive list of pitching statistics that have placed him in the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame in the [North Carolina Museum of History](#) <sup>[3]</sup> in Raleigh as well as in the [National Baseball Hall of Fame](#) <sup>[4]</sup> in Cooperstown, New York.

The youngest son of Abbott and Millie Hunter, Jim enjoyed hunting, fishing and playing baseball with his brothers. While at Perquimans High School, Hunter excelled in a variety of sports, enjoying success as a linebacker and offensive end in football as well as a shortstop, cleanup batter and pitcher in baseball. His pitching skill began to attract scouts from major league baseball teams to Hertford. In his senior year, Hunter was wounded in a hunting accident which led to the loss of one of his toes and the lodging of shotgun pellets in his foot. The accident left Hunter somewhat hobbled and jeopardized his prospects in the eyes of many professional scouts, but the Kansas City Athletics had faith in the young pitcher and signed Hunter to a contract.



Charles O. Finley, the Kansas City owner, gave Hunter the nickname "Catfish". The investment that Finley and the Athletics made in "Catfish" was returned many times over. Hunter's first major league victory came on July 27, 1965 in Fenway Park against the Boston Red Sox. In 1966 Hunter was named to the American League All-Star team and was named again in 1967. In 1968 Charles Finley moved the Athletics from Kansas City to Oakland and on May 8 that year in a game against the Minnesota Twins, Hunter pitched the first perfect game in the American League since 1922. He continued to win games and in 1974 both received the Cy Young Award and was named Pitcher of the Year by *The Sporting News*. After a contract dispute with Finley in 1974, Hunter left the Athletics in 1975 for the New York Yankees. Catfish's statistics while he was with the Athletics were impressive: four consecutive years with at least 20 wins, four World Series wins with no losses and a 1974 league leading earned run average of 2.49.

Hunter was the highest paid pitcher in baseball when he signed with the Yankees in 1975. That year he again won more than 20 games and was named to the All-Star team for the seventh time. Hunter would be named to the All-Star team again in 1976. The Yankees won three straight pennants with Hunter from 1976 to 1979. However, the years of arm strain and the effects of diabetes had begun to tell on the pitcher and in 1979 at the age of 33, Jim "Catfish" Hunter retired from baseball. Jim Hunter was an effective pitcher, not because he overpowered batters with his speed, but because of the precision of his pitching. His performance on the mound earned him a spot in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1987.

Hunter retired to familiar surroundings in Hertford <sup>[5]</sup>, North Carolina, close to where he grew up and where he owns a modest farm. Hunter has returned to the North Carolina life he enjoyed as a boy. In his own words..."If I hadn't played baseball, I wanted to be a game warden or something. I want to be outdoors and I think down here is the best outdoor living you can get, for fishing or hunting, or whatever you want."

He was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's Disease) in September of 1998, and died of complications from the disease on September 9, 1999, at the age of 53.

### References and additional resources:

"Catfish Hunter Statistics and History." Baseball-reference.com. <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/h/hunteca01.shtml> <sup>[6]</sup>

Hunter, Jim, and Armen Keteyian. 1989. *Catfish: my life in baseball* New York: Berkeley Books.

Stambler, Irwin. 1976. *Catfish Hunter: the three million dollar arm* New York: Putnam.

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Video from WRAL "Tarheel Traveler." <http://www.wral.com/lifestyles/travel/video/8260577> <sup>[9]</sup>

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### Authors:

Case, Steven <sup>[12]</sup>

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