

Nolan Ryan is known for many things. The strikeout king of all time with 5,714. Over 300 wins at 324. Seven career no hitters. And showing Robin Ventura that chargin the mound against him is not a good idea. But as with anything in life, it's not as if his success has come easy.

On the day of his 7th no hitter, Ryan spent part of the time reminiscing on how he was still going after 25 years of professional baseball.

In his words, it did not start out like a good day. He woke up with a sore back and took painkillers before leaving his house in Alvin for the long drive to Arlington Stadium where his team, the Texas Rangers, played their home games. He was slated to be the starting pitcher that night.

The heavy-hitting Toronto Blue Jays were in town. Ryan was going with just four days rest since his last start. He hadn't been very successful the previous season with less than five days rest, and at age 44 he could've used that extra day.

At the park he went through extra stretching exercises and even wore a heating pad during the scouting meeting where the pitcher and coach go over the hitters.

Then, while he was loosening up in the bull pen, scar tissue tore open on the middle finger of his pitching hand. He told pitching coach Tom House, who was also 44, "I don't know about you, Tom, but I feel old today. My back hurts, my finger hurts, my ankle hurts, everything hurts."

Even his kids—Wendy 15, Reese, 16, and Reid, 20—teased Ryan at that point about being an old man and losing his hair and asked when he was going to get a hairpiece. He just tells them that's the way the Lord wanted me, so he doesn't worry about it.

He worried more about losing something off his fastball than off the top of his head. On that day it didn't feel like he would have much of anything on the ball.

Nolan had one of his worst warm-ups ever. Right after the national anthem the Rangers' manager, Bobby Valentine, came out to the mound and asked how the back was.

"It'll be history once I start pitching," Nolan told him. Adrenaline would still always takes over when he was on the mound, even after 25 seasons in the majors.

But he wondered how long he'd last after the kind of stuff he had—or didn't have—in the bull pen. He learned later that Tom House had told Bobby to keep a close eye on him and not leave him in too long. "We'll just take this one hitter at a time," Nolan told himself before the first pitch.

At least Ruth, his wife, had made it. She and Jim, a neighbor, had made the trip to Arlington in his plane. He got word that she was in the park. He was glad she was there. As it ended up, she was glad too.

With two out in the first he walked Kelly Gruber, the Jays third hitter, on a full count. He was mad at himself, but settled down and got out of the

inning by retiring Joe Carter. In the second he struck out all three Toronto hitters on curveballs. The fastball was hopping too.

He started to feel all the hard work that he had done in the weight room between starts kick in. Ryan says: “If you want to know my key to success, it's that simple: hard work.

Work. I truly like work. It's a philosophy I got from my parents, growing up in Alvin. If my baseball career ended next week, I'd still be working. I enjoy manual labor. I enjoy working cattle on my ranch outside town.”

In going on about work, he says: “I get a lot of satisfaction out of doing a good job, whether it's mowing a yard, doing a flower bed or building a fence. I look out at my property and see the fence I put up, and it makes me feel good that I dug the postholes and did the final paint job.”

His dad was known as a hard worker, even in a town full of hardworking folks. He was a supervisor for an oil company, but at night—or rather at an unearthly hour of the morning—he, his brother Bob and Nolan would deliver The Houston Post around Alvin in the family van.

They had about 1,500 customers, and every one of those papers had to be rolled individually.

There was an old movie theater next to the spot where they'd roll papers—at the Sinclair filling station on the corner of Sealy and Gordon—and Nolan remembers watching skunks pop up from the storm drain to eat the popcorn people had dropped.

But what he remembers most is that Dad could always roll as many papers as Bob and he could together.

Much has been made about how Nolan learned to throw by tossing those papers around Alvin. He says that's pretty much an exaggeration by writers looking for something to write about. But he did learn how to work hard.

So on that chilly May night against the Jays his work seemed to pay off. He felt himself loosening up. The Rangers scored three runs in the third, two on a Ruben Sierra homer.

After the walk to Gruber in the first, Nolan got the next 18 hitters before giving up another two-out, full-count walk in the seventh, to dangerous Joe Carter.

He got out of the seventh without giving up a hit.

He had to take things one pitch at a time. In 1989 he'd taken five hitless games into the eighth or ninth inning only to surrender a hit. In fact he holds the record for one-hitters.

He got through the eighth okay. In the ninth Nolan retired the first two batters. He'd racked up 15 strikeouts. All he had to do was retire young second baseman Roberto Alomar for his seventh career no-hitter.

He worked the count to 2 and 2. The crowd was going crazy on each pitch. Nolan had to keep his concentration. Behind him his teammates waited tensely, ready to run down the ball wherever it was hit. He took a deep breath and went into his motion.

With a fastball he was later told clocked in at 93 miles an hour, he fired the ball toward the plate. Roberto swung, missed, and his seventh no-hitter went into the books.

Normally Nolan says he's pretty stone-faced. But even he had to grin as his teammates piled out of the dugout to congratulate him.

“I had pretty good stuff for an old man,” Nolan says on that night.

Looking at his career, Ryan sums it up by saying: “There’s no secret to what I do. God gave me a great right arm, but it's up to me to do the hard training it takes to keep playing. If that sounds boring, that's the way many big leaguers feel about it too. It may be the reason why most of them quit in their 30s.

But I'm not bored. I like work. Especially when it pays off, like it did that night when a guy who felt old was able to do a young man's job. And for just a little while, at least, his kids stopped teasing him about losing his hair.

It’s not always easy to see, but work pays off for us too, because work is for our benefit. It makes us better and teaches us so much. It’s a part of who we are as humans, not some type of punishment, but a means of making ourselves and one another better.

Saint Paul in our second reading talks quite a bit about work. He says “in toil and drudgery, night and day, we worked” to the community, saying he

didn't ask for a free ride, but came to them and also worked to earn ends meat. Paul was a tentmaker, a tough job but an important one in the ancient world as people needed tents to have shelter from the elements when they travelled. Paul goes on to say those who are unwilling to work in the community should not eat, as he knows some are sitting about gossiping minding other's business, when they should get to business themselves.

It's a great reading because we all can sometimes be prone to thinking work is a just miserable. Work can be difficult, and it can be a problem if one is a workaholic or makes their labor their god, but work can be such a powerful means to grace too. So how do we make that happen?

Saint John Paul II gave us a lot of insight into it. He himself was a laborer; he worked in a rock quarry and chemical plant prior to World War II. And after he became a priest and then bishop and pope, he'd refer to his writing desk as the intellectual workbench. With that background, he wrote an encyclical on human labor, something the Church has written about for several centuries now, dating back to 1891 when "Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor" was written by Pope Leo XIII. Going over all the Church

teaches on labor filled multiple weeks in our seminary course on Catholic Social teaching, but there are a few things we need to keep in mind with respect to work.

For one, work is fulfilling. It's why God had Adam till the soil and subdue the earth before original sin entered the picture. It's why Nolan Ryan would get such satisfaction at finishing a paint job or project on his ranch.

Through work, we partake in God's creation; John Paul II said labor is participation in the work of the Creator and the Redeemer. And this is in all kinds of work, for in our work we care for creation and build up the world.

Even in the most simple of things. I think for instance of the incredible work that goes into caring for this parish and make it thrive. So much is done with love, from the laundering of the altar linens to the cleaning of the sanctuary on Monday mornings to the preparation for faith formation on Wednesday nights to the funeral lunches that are held. This is why work is spiritual; in our home lives the cooking, cleaning, and caring for one another have such an impact. So don't think for a minute that work does not matter, because it does - it's a big way we live out our faith. It's also why we must never think one job matters more than others, because all that we do matters.

Second, work awakens our potential. When we don't work, we can become lazy. But when we work, we can unlock hidden talents. That's why while at the time, projects and homework in school might not seem like much fun, but they give us the tools we need to find our vocation. As we work and learn our trades, we discover the talents God gave us that just need to be fine-tuned.

Third, we always must remember too that work has a human component to it. John Paul II stressed that that we must always remember that human component to work. When we don't, we can treat people with disrespect. So many of us have experienced that; the teacher, the waitress, the police officer, the phone sales representative, etc., so many aren't treated as human beings in our society, but just as if they were machines or we get selfish and berate them if we are upset. And still others can be treated like machines in that we expect others to do things, or their company dehumanizes them. We must always remember labor involves real people.

Fourth, labor builds relationships. Nolan Ryan looked back fondly on doing the paper route with his brother and dad, and it built the bond between

them. I see that on our staff too in that we truly are a little family in many ways; we care about one another and are united in the greater mission of serving God and the parish. Our work can draw us together and into a bigger mission.

Lastly, through it all balance is of course needed. Martha and Mary are both saints. If work consumes us, it's a problem. If play consumes us, it's a problem. God takes a day off, we can too. So look at your schedule, and ask yourselves where you are at. Do you make time for prayer. Do you have downtime, such as a family night in or game night. Do you make some time for healthy leisure to recharge. Or on the other end, are you playing video games all the time, or going out all the time? Do you procrastinate things whether it's the homework or the housework? Parents, remember it's OK to say no and to pull the plug or seize the phone until the chores or homework gets done. And make sure your kids aren't overextended too but getting some time to play in the yard or with friends and to just be kids. Sometimes people can feel selfish for taking a day off, but it's so important to have rest and time for prayer too to have a balanced life.

My mom and dad are two of the hardest working people I've ever known. Dad worked in maintenance for years in schools; mom worked downtown at Donaldsons and then for Minnegasco after Donaldsons was bought in 1988. I don't think it's what they envisioned when they were 10. But then they worked at home, they made time for me and my sister growing up, they gave much help to their own parents, and did all of this with a positive attitude. It's because their work was an extension of their faith. And in all that they did and continue to do, this world is a better place because of it, just as it is in what you do too. So let's not run away from work, for all of us are laborers in God's vineyard, and may we see our daily labor as part of God's plan for us to bring us to sainthood.