



BRIAN HOLTON

Class of 1977

Had **Brian Holton** walked away from sports after that sunny June afternoon nearly 50 years ago, he still would have ranked as one of the greatest athletes in the history of Elizabeth Forward High School. Oh, but there was much more to come.

On June 8, 1976, Holton and his wicked curveball held Springdale to six hits and three runs over seven innings as EF claimed its first WPIAL baseball championship. That was the end of the road for high school ball back then. There was no state championship in the sport, which made that triumph all the more meaningful. Holton was the starting pitcher in three of the four games required to win that title, and he closed out the other by pitching the final two innings.

It was not the only baseball championship in which he would have an indispensable role.

As was typical of the best athletes of the era, Holton excelled in the three highest-profile team sports: He was a terrific receiver in football, a reliable shooting guard in basketball and possibly the best pitcher ever at EF.

Following his high school graduation, Holton attended Louisburg College in North Carolina and played fall baseball. He threw against some of the best college players in the region and impressed a Los Angeles Dodgers scout enough for the team to draft him in the first round of the Winter Draft. Holton signed a contract to join one of the top organizations in baseball – and his path to World Series heroics had an official beginning.

A dozen years after that afternoon at Highlands High School in Natrona Heights, Holton was called in to pitch at Dodger Stadium in the sixth inning of Game 1 at the 1988 World Series. It was the culmination of his best year in professional baseball and set the stage for one of the greatest moments in American sports history.

The 1988 season was Holton's second in the majors, after he'd fought for attention from the pitching-rich Dodgers through nearly a decade of success at the Class AAA minor league level. He posted a 16-6 record in 1981, but teammate Ted Power was 18-3 and got his chance to move to the big leagues. Brian was 12-8 in 1982, but future All-Star Orel Hershiser gained more attention.

After returning from elbow surgery that cost him nearly an entire season and recording another successful year in Albuquerque, Holton eventually was called up to the Dodgers for brief stays in 1985 and 1986, and in between came another career highlight. He decided to pitch "winter ball" in the Dominican Republic, and he helped pitch his team – the Lacey Lions – to the Caribbean World Series title. He compiled a 6-1 record during the regular season and then started Game 3 of that series, with the Lions posting a 4-1 victory. The competition including a variety of Major League players and convinced Holton he was capable of pitching in the "biggs".

Holton became a full-time major leaguer in 1987 for the Dodgers. In his second and best season in the majors, 1988, he was used primarily as a long reliever. Holton posted a win-loss record of 7-3 and an earned run average of 1.70. Among pitchers who completed 70 or more innings that year, he ranked among the top 25 in the ratio of walks and hits allowed to innings pitched, a stat whose acronym in the baseball world is WHIP.

The Dodgers won 94 games and the championship of the National League West Division, even though they were not a powerful hitting team. They had great pitching, with Holton very much a part of that. He was considered to have one of the best curveballs in the game, which he needed because his fastball only occasionally broke the 90-mile-per-hour mark.

He became a hero in the 1988 National League Championship Series against Daryl Strawberry, Gary Carter and the heavily favored New York Mets. Brian appeared in three games in that series. The first was Game 4, when he was called in with Carter on third base, no outs and the Dodgers already down two runs. Holton stranded him by earning a strikeout and double play. The Dodgers then rallied to tie the game and won in extra innings. Holton earned a save in LA's Game 5 victory.

In the opening game of the World Series, against the mighty Oakland A's, the Dodgers again found themselves in a hole after their starting pitcher had a tough outing, and Holton again found himself in the position of needing to hold the opposition in place to permit his team's offense to stage a comeback. Holton faced seven batters over two innings – each one an All-Star in his career, including Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire and Dave Parker – and allowed only a single batter to reach base. Holton entered with the Dodgers down two runs and left with them still down two runs. And a few innings later, Kirk Gibson hit one of the most dramatic home runs in World Series history to win the game in the bottom of the ninth. The Dodgers went on to win the Series in five games.

Holton finished his Major League career with a record of 20-19 and an ERA of 3.62. His long stay and great success in Albuquerque has him still ranked second on the AAA club's career victories list.

Following his World Series triumph, Brian was traded by the Dodgers to the Baltimore Orioles as part of a package in exchange for first baseman Eddie Murray. It did not help that he was traded for a future Baseball Hall of Famer. Holton had considered himself a Dodger. That heartbreak helped contribute to some difficult times later in his life, including bouts with alcoholism and addiction that were chronicled in the Los Angeles Times by columnist Bill Plaschke.

Holton has overcome those issues and is now living happily in retirement in Wisconsin with his partner, Kerry Kelly, and their dog, JoJo.