

A photograph of two men in baseball uniforms standing on a field. The man on the left is older, with white hair, wearing a dark blue jacket and a dark blue cap with a red 'N' logo. The man on the right is younger, wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt, a dark blue cap with sunglasses on top, and white pants with a red and blue stripe down the side. He is holding a brown Wilson baseball glove. The background shows green stadium seating.

THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

Lance Niekro Hopes To Pick Up
Where His Dad and Uncle Phil Left Off

Phil and Lance Niekro chat during the Hall of Fame Fantasy Camp this past October in Cooperstown.

When Lance Niekro sat down last month with a contract from the Atlanta Braves, one particular section gave him pause.

"It was kind of weird," Niekro said, "putting down a 'P'."

If Niekro — the nephew of Braves legendary knuckleballer and Hall of Famer Phil Niekro and son of late Braves knuckleballer Joe Niekro — felt awkward identifying himself as a "pitcher" before he heads to minor league spring training, he had good reason. After all, he's been a hitter throughout his college and professional career. Add to that the fact that the Braves have never seen him pitch. Nor has his uncle, for that matter.

But this "P" makes perfect sense to all parties involved for a singular reason: They all believe in the power of the Niekro knuckleball. And as pitchers report to spring training, they will all be eager to see where this curious pitch lands Lance Niekro.

"I always threw a knuckleball messing around," said Lance, who will turn 30 on Jan. 28. "[Pitching] has always been in the back of my mind. I said if the opportunity came, I'd take it."

Lance was drafted by the San Francisco Giants at age 21 and began his professional career as a third baseman, but moved to first base in the minor leagues after an injury. After Joe's sudden death from a cerebral aneurysm in October 2006, Lance had trouble focusing on baseball, although he continued to play for the Giants through 2007 (and made one pitching appearance for the Fresno Grizzlies in August of that year). He had a short stint with the Houston Astros in 2008 before he was released in May and started getting back in shape mentally.

"Different people have different ways of dealing with things," he said. "For me, after my dad passed away, being back on the field wasn't something that cleared my mind. It just led me in the wrong direction. It took me a while to realize that."

Last year, Lance took a step back from baseball and started working for a friend who owns a telecommunications company. He balanced out his desk job with running and gym workouts.

"I'm probably in better shape now than ever," he said in December. "My wife keeps me on a strict and healthy diet."

Meanwhile, every time Lance talked to Phil, the possibility of him returning to baseball came up in conversation. And



Lance signs his first pro contract with the Giants in 2000 with his father, Joe, a former Brave who won 221 career games, at his side.

then, last fall, he made a decision. It wasn't overnight, it wasn't a light bulb flash, but over time, Lance made up his mind to explore the possibility of a pitching career.

"I want to go out and play for myself," he said, "and for my family."

Lance got the green light from his wife, and he picked up the phone to call Phil.

"Lance called me and said, 'Uncle Phil, I have figured it out now,' Phil said. "'I'm ready to get back, and I want to get back as a knuckleball pitcher.' I tried to get him to

think about it a year ago, but he just wasn't into it. I think he was just lost without his dad. So, I was really glad to hear he's now ready."

After that conversation, Phil called Braves GM Frank Wren. "He said, 'Yeah, we'll take a look. This is new to us and new to Lance, but we'll invite him to spring training.'"

Wren then called Lance and explained the situation. He invited Lance to Disney's Wide World of Sports for minor league training camp, but he stressed that nobody knew what to expect.

Indeed, this is new territory for everyone. While the Braves have multiple scouting reports on Lance, they're all as a position player. Not only are the Braves unfamiliar with Lance's knuckleball, they don't have anyone on staff who can coach him. But they have a commitment from Phil to work with his nephew on the pitch that has been in the Niekro family since Phil and Joe started playing backyard catch with their father. (They went on to become the winningest brother combination - 539 victories, 318 for Phil and 221 for Joe - in major league history, largely as a result of the knuckleball.)

"The learning curve will be steep, but it'll be fun because we'll all be going through it together," said Braves director of player development Kurt Kemp, who oversees all the Braves minor league teams. "We don't have a template for this, but then, neither does he."

Kemp said it's not only unusual for him to



"Knucksie" demonstrates the famous knuckleball grip that enabled him to win 318 career games and baseball immortality with a plaque at Cooperstown.

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The Braves have a commitment from Phil Niekro to spend plenty of quality time like this with his nephew, Lance, in an effort to develop him into a major league knuckleball pitcher.

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

be working with a knuckleballer, but he'll also have the challenge of developing a position player into a pitcher. They will all learn the best way for Lance to practice and how often he needs to throw. Then they'll put him on the mound and see how his pitch performs. He said the whole scenario works because Phil has the background and will be an invaluable resource for Lance.

"This will be the first time I'll see him field groundballs, the first time I'll see him pitch," Kemp said. "Our job is to create the environment and opportunity through spring training to see if this could be a viable thing to take to the minor leagues and eventually to the major leagues. This will be a maiden voyage for all of us."

Kemp said once camp breaks, there is still the option of keeping Lance in extended spring training from April 11 to early June, depending on his progress.

Since Lance talked to the Braves, he has been running more and trying to build arm strength in the gym. He is also working out with a friend and former college catcher near his home in Lakeland, Fla.

"I'm not throwing off the mound, but we go out three to four times a week," he said. "I'm really excited about it now. I'm having fun going out there."

He plans to get together with Phil a few times - either in Florida (where Lance lives) or Georgia (where Phil lives) - before spring training.

"I'll be looking to Phil for a lot of advice," Lance said. "What better teacher can I have - a family member and a Hall of Famer? I just want to make sure I'm not going out and creating bad habits. I have a good knuckleball, but it's not as consistent as it could be."

Lance threw his first knuckleball when he was 12 or 13 years old, growing up in Bend, Ore. At the time, Joe was coaching a Colorado Rockies minor league team, and Lance remembers they did a lot of throwing.

"We'd start off real soft, just throwing it up in the air," Lance said. "Gradually, over a couple weeks, he'd back up and then I would throw it harder. That's how I learned."

He says he pictured himself as a pitcher until the middle of high school, but he didn't throw hard enough, so he started focusing on hitting.

"Being a hitter got me to the big leagues for a couple years," he said. "But now it's time to take a different path."

As a major league rookie first baseman in 2005, he hit .252 with 12 home runs and 46 RBIs in 278 at-bats.

Phil said the most important thing is desire, which he's certain Lance has.

"He's got to forget about the home runs," Phil said. "He's got to eat, drink, breathe and sleep knuckleball 24 hours a day. Whether he can make an adjustment, we'll find out. He's a big, strong guy (6-3, 210), and he's a good athlete. He's got the tools, there's no question about that. If he can get the knuckleball to the plate, he can make it to the big leagues."

Phil said the other keys to Lance's training are confidence and repetition. Since few people know anything about the knuckleball, there aren't many places Lance will be able to go for help. Phil said it's important that he become his own coach. Either way, the two Niekros agree that the knuckleball talent is genetic.

"I told him, 'You've got the baseball blood in you,'" Phil said. "There's something in his genes. We'll all find out. Maybe we've got a diamond in the rough here."

Phil is excited for Lance's opportunity, but he is equally excited about coaching his brother's son.

"I'm going to do everything I can to assist him," he said. "He's a good kid, he's good on a team, good in the clubhouse, and good around people. It'll be a pleasure and an honor working with him."