

1976

## 'WE HLOVE HRABOSKY,' SAY CARD FANS, BUT FOES DON'T HLIKE HIM AT ALL

**T**he game is close, the situation crucial. On the mound, Al Hrabosky, the St. Louis Cardinals' guerrilla relief pitcher, fairly froths as Willie Stargell, the Pittsburgh Pirates' slugger, walks to the plate. Hrabosky scowls. And with his dark, heavy eyebrows and Fu Manchu mustache, he rates as an All-Star scowler. Suddenly he turns his back on Stargell.

Hrabosky gazes toward left field. He is talking to himself. What is he saying? "All right, Stargell, you're a great hitter but you are going to have to get your hits tomorrow because this is Al Hrabosky pitching. I am in control, I am a schizo bent on destruction. I defy you to stand in that batter's box." With that, Hrabosky stalks back onto the mound and fires his most baleful grimace at Stargell.

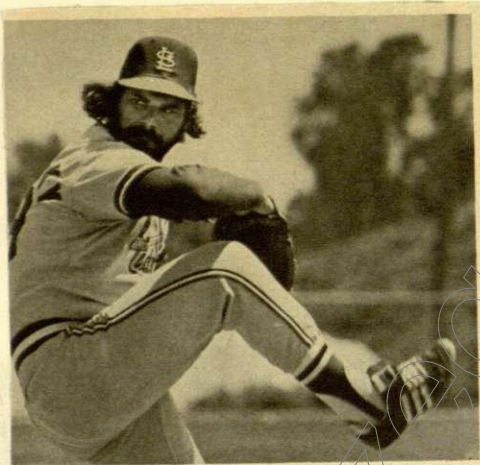
The purpose of such antics is twofold: to help Hrabosky concentrate and to unnerve the batter. Of course, it does not always work. In the game just described, Stargell calmly waited him out and then hit a home run. ("That's all right," Hrabosky maintains. "It just gives me fuel for revenge.")

Coupled with Hrabosky's formidable pitching ability, the routine works often enough for Hrabosky to rank as baseball's best relief pitcher. Last season he won 13 games, saved 22 wins for other pitchers and allowed an extraordinarily low 1.67 earned runs for each nine innings.

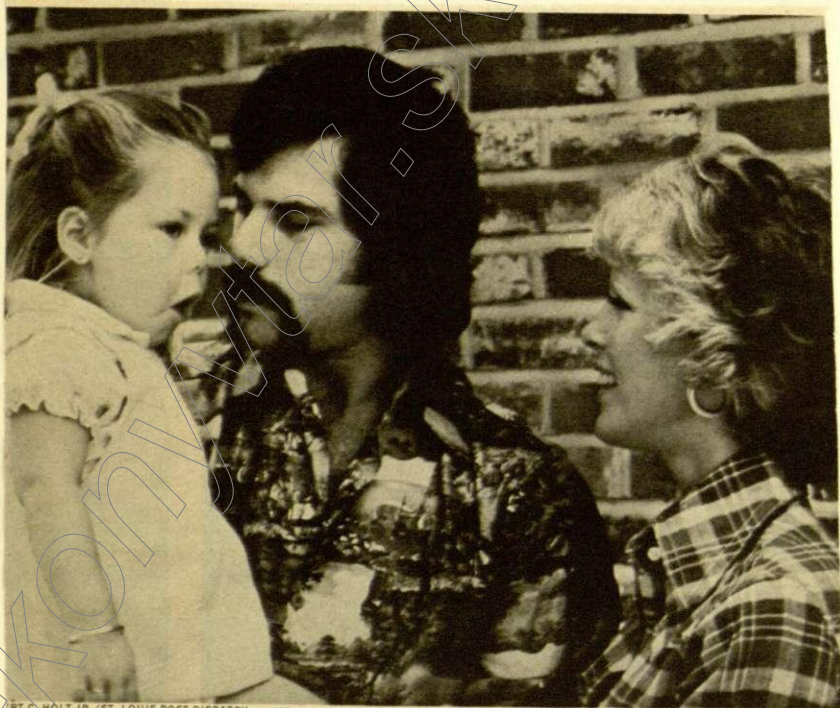
Hrabosky, known as "The Mad Hungarian," cherishes his villainous role. "When we play in St. Louis and the fans cheer for me, it's great," Hrabosky says. "But when people in other cities pay their way in to see me lose and I win, that's what I really like."

In his less strident moments, Hrabosky admits, "I'm a salesman with one thing to sell: myself." Until two years ago, though, Hrabosky had little to sell. After an athletically traumatic childhood—he was a Little League reject—Hrabosky became a good enough junior college pitcher to earn a Cardinal contract in 1969. But then he shuttled between the major and the minor leagues for five years. In mid-1974, he launched his on-the-mound theatrics and his record improved dramatically. He and Cardinal publicity man Jerry Lovelace divined that fans, tired of reading about the stock portfolios of such pitchers as Catfish Hunter and Tom Seaver, might respond to a colorful performer with a bizarre nickname. Hrabosky suggested "Mad Dog." Not wishing to annoy pet owners, Lovelace came up with the name that stuck. (Al's family was originally "Hrabvoskzy"—the "H" is silent—but his father

*"People" May 24, 1976*



**The Mad Hungarian left-hander inspires St. Louis Cards fans to hang out stadium banners that say, "Hrattle 'm Hrabsosky."**



ART C. HOLT JR./ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH

**Outside their suburban St. Louis home, wife Dee watches Al cast a more or less loving glance at their daughter, Lisa, 4.**



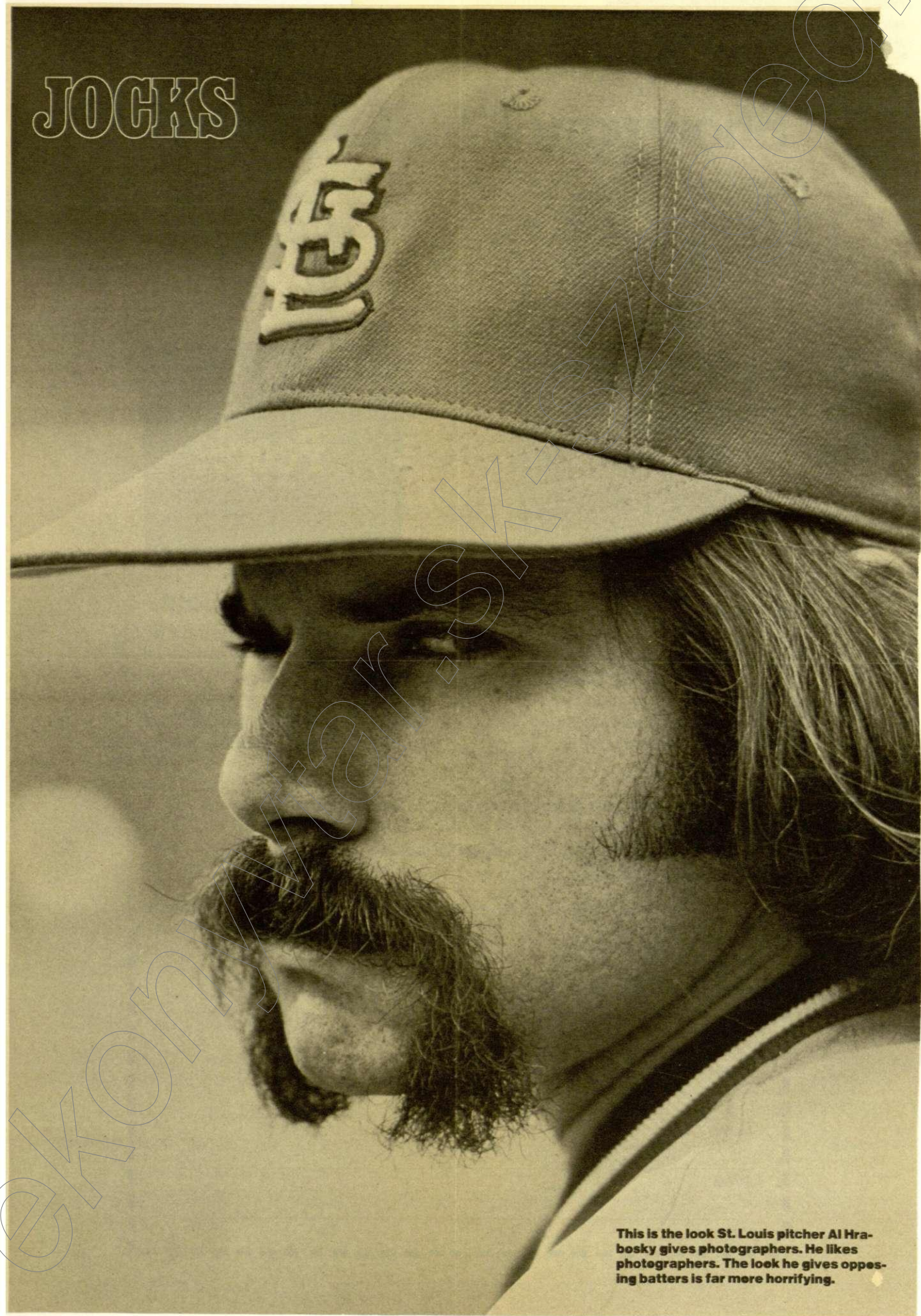
simplified the spelling, earning the gratitude of scorekeepers everywhere.) By July of last season, Hrabosky had become so popular in St. Louis that the Cardinals held a "We Hlove Hrabosky Hbanner Hday."

Hrabosky and his wife, Dee, who were high school sweethearts in Anaheim, Calif. and worked summers at Disneyland, now live in St. Louis. In his spare moments, Al announces a local radio sports show and once even narrated *Peter and the Wolf* with the St. Louis Symphony.

Despite his antics, he has earned the opposition's respect. Bill Madlock of the Chicago Cubs had a run-in with Hrabosky in 1974. Irked by Hrabosky's mumbo jumbo, Madlock kept stepping out of the batter's box. This led to an exchange of words and shoves. Madlock has since forgiven Hrabosky for that, but not for holding him hitless all last year, when Madlock was the National League's top batter. "He gets you so mad he just whizzes the ball right by before you know it," Madlock says. "I wish he was ours."

RALPH NOVAK

JOCKS



**This is the look St. Louis pitcher Al Hrabosky gives photographers. He likes photographers. The look he gives opposing batters is far more horrifying.**