

Maury Ornest Ruled the Diamond and Easel

Former UCSB Baseball Star Remembered for His Art and Smile



By [John Zant](#)

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When a team has a burst of success that puts it on a national stage, as UCSB's baseball team did this spring, it prompts memories of seasons and characters that stand out in the history of that team.

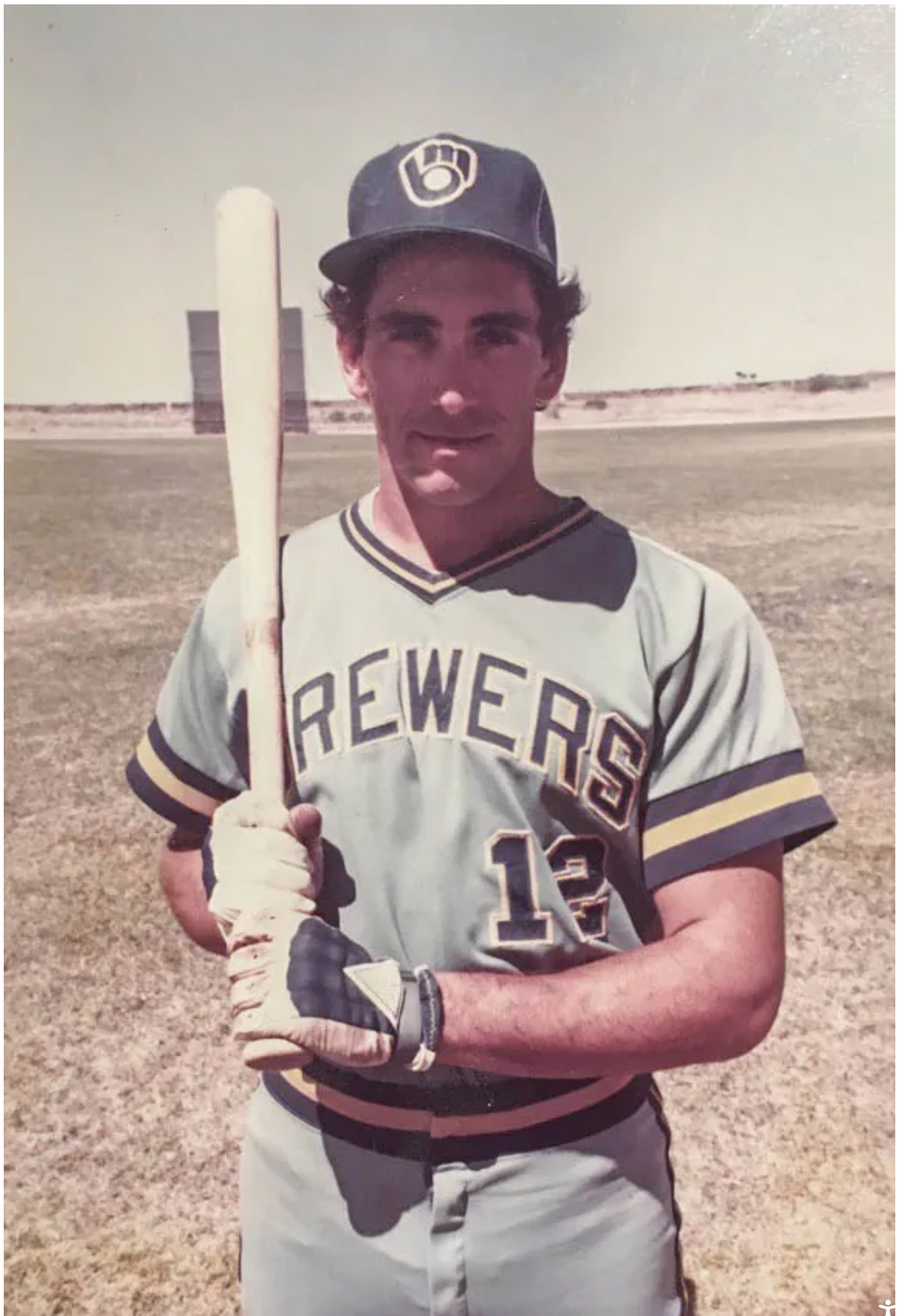
Bernie Massey and Florie Kemper-Bunzel thought of Maury Ornest, who in 1980 was UCSB's highest pick in the major league draft up to that time — a third-round selection (76th overall) by the Milwaukee Brewers. Ornest is still among the Gauchos' top 10 hitters with a .363 career batting average.

Massey was Ornest's roommate in Isla Vista, and Kemper-Bunzel was his girlfriend. They remember him as more than a slugging third baseman. "He was gregarious, hilarious, a great story teller, and not shy of anything or any moment," Massey said. "Just a great and talented guy on and off the field," said Kemper-Bunzel.

One of his talents became manifest in a big way earlier this year, when "Mo's Show: A Celebration of the Life and Work of Maury Ornest" was held in Beverly Hills. On display were hundreds of paintings by Ornest that were discovered after he died last year, at age 58, from heart disease. He expressed whimsy and joy in his creations — for instance, combining baseballs and flying fish — while struggling with mental illness for several decades.

"He was too afraid to show his art, but he hoped someone would own it," said Laura Ornest, Maury's sister, who organized the show. It was a solid hit, she said, raising more than \$80,000 for charity and placing more than 250 paintings in offices and homes, including those of Massey and Kemper-Bunzel.

My own recollection of Maury Ornest was stirred by a piece in the *L.A. Times* last week about his father, Harry Ornest, a businessman whose purchase of the St. Louis Blues in 1983 prevented the hockey team's proposed move to Canada. Maury had mentioned his father, who then owned the Triple-A baseball team in Vancouver, when I interviewed him in 1980. Maury joined the family's management team in St. Louis after injuries ended his baseball career.



But in his mid-20s, Maury descended into a mental abyss. “He had little control of it,” said Massey, who remained friends with his former roommate. “He was not the same person ... and he knew it. His transformation and what he went through is extraordinarily sad.”

It is with a smile, though, that Maury’s friends recall their Gauchos days and, now, are able to appreciate the power of his imagination.



Maury Baseball Fish

OUT OF INNINGS: Although their presence in the NCAA baseball tournament was disappointingly brief — losses to Fresno State and Sacramento State in the Stanford regional — the Gauchos have lots of reasons to smile about their 2019 season. With a 45-11 record, they won more Division 1

games than any other UCSB team. They captured their first Big West championship in 33 years while placing 13 players on the all-conference teams, including catcher Eric Yang, the field player of the year, and Rodney Boone, freshman pitcher of the year.

The biggest downer of their last game was a freak injury to Tommy Jew. The junior centerfielder, a two-time all-Big West first teamer, ran so hard after hitting an infield grounder that he fractured both bones in his shin when his foot hit the first-base bag.

Yang is one of three finalists for the Buster Posey National Collegiate Catcher of the Year Award. It will be no shame if he does not win it, because another finalist is Oregon State catcher Adley Rutschman, who was chosen No. 1 overall by the Baltimore Orioles in this week's major league draft.

HONORS GALORE: If it seems as though UCSB and Westmont College are high achievers on the field of play, the accolades bestowed on them by their respective conferences confirm it. UCSB has been awarded its 10th Big West Commissioner's Cup — the most garnered by any member school — and Westmont received its seventh consecutive Golden State Athletic Conference All-Sports Award. The honors signify that each college had the best overall sports standings among their conference peers in 2019.

The Gauchos and Warriors put a high value on their athletes' academic standing as well. This is borne out by the Golden Eagle Awards, which community activists Pete and Gerd Jordano sponsor at an annual banquet they host for each school. They started with UCSB 32 years ago.

Among the Gauchos' 20 Golden Eagle winners this year is track and field athlete Hope Bender, who carries a 3.75 grade-point average in biological sciences. She is a contender in the heptathlon at this weekend's NCAA Championships in Austin, Texas.

Westmont had a married couple among its academic champions: Dana Nemitz, who won the NAIA outdoor title in the women's pole vault, and Jackson Nemitz, who placed sixth in the decathlon. (Pieter Top, a Westmont junior, won his second consecutive national title in the 10-eventer).

VAQUERO LEGENDS: Santa Barbara City College recently inaugurated the Vaqueros Hall of Fame by inducting seven individuals: Booker Brown (football lineman who went on the USC and the San Diego Chargers); the late Gary Woods (baseball star who played nine years in the majors); Marina Gomez (volleyball, basketball, track and field); Debbie Ekola (tennis player and longtime SBCC instructor); the late Bud Revis (pioneer athletic coach and administrator); Bob Dinaberg (22-year athletic director and football coach who won eight conference titles); and Pat Moorhouse (coach of 19 title-winning teams in women's volleyball and tennis).

Current SBCC achievements include tennis standout Maddie Mitchell's being named the national winner of the Arthur Ashe Jr. Leadership & Sportsmanship Award. The Vaquero women's basketball team had five players named to the Academic All-State Team. Aaliyah Pauling and Lei Talaro received merit-based scholarships from La Verne University, and Maaria Jaakkola earned an academic scholarship from UC Berkeley.

Mitch Wishnowsky, an all-state punter for SBCC in 2014 and a three-time All-American at Utah, was chosen in the fourth round of the 2019 NFL Draft by the San Francisco 49ers.

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