

John Henry Moss: Baseball Promoter

By GARY STEWART
Managing Editor

As a youngster growing up on the Park Yarn Mill hill John Henry Moss dreamed of being a major league baseball player. In later years he was the first to admit he didn't have what it took to play the game, so he did the next best thing...he promoted it.

Moss's promotion of sports from the amateur level in his hometown to the professional level as president of the Western Carolinas and South Atlantic Leagues has landed him in the newly-organized Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame which will hold its initial dinner and induction ceremony on April 11 at 7 p.m. at the community center. Joining Moss as initial inductees are the late Jake Early, a major league catcher for 10 years; pro football star Kevin Mack of the Cleveland Browns, and former pro basketball George Adams.

"I played second base and the outfield, was a pretty good defensive player and had a good arm," says Moss of his playing days. "But I did not hit too well."

Moss played some high school ball, organized and played for the Park Yarn team in the old sandlot leagues around Kings Mountain, and actually signed a pro baseball contract. He played in the Spartanburg area for a short period and then decided his baseball future was not on the playing field.

He had foresight, though, and that made him successful in front office work. In addition to organizing semi-pro and professional teams in this area, he served several years as a general manager for pro baseball and football teams and for 29 years has been president of the Western Carolinas League, which a few years back changed its name to the South Atlantic League. The league office has operated out of Kings Mountain all those years.

Today he serves as vice-president of the National Association of Pro Baseball Leagues and in that capacity is chairman of baseball's executive committee. He presided at this year's winter meetings in the absence of president Johnny Johnson, who was seriously ill at the time and has since passed away. Moss was asked to run for the presidency but declined because if he won he would have to move to Florida.

As a league president and front office man, he has seen some of baseball's best talent over the past 40 years, and over 400 of his former players are now on major league rosters. But some of his best memories in baseball trace back to the 1930s and 1940s when all the mills and communities around Kings Mountain had baseball teams and any Saturday one could find a game going on anywhere in the area.

"I often wonder what would have happened had some of the people who played around here during that time would have had the opportunities that exist for athletes today," he said. "I remember Wray Stewart who played for the Kings Creek team down at Dixon and he could knock the ball a mile. But he was a farm boy and didn't have the opportunity to get good coaching and training. It's phenomenal the advances that the game has made, beginning with the facilities and including the whole structure of the game. Baseball certainly presents a tremendous opportunity for a young man with athletic ability."

Moss recalled that Park Yarn, Mauney Mill, Dilling, Phenix, Pauline and Neisler Mills all had semi-pro teams here and many of the outlying communities such as Dixon, Patterson Grove and

(ED. NOTE - John Henry Moss, Kevin Mack, George Adams and the late Jake Early will be inducted into the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame April 11 at 7 p.m. at the community center. Marty Schottenheimer, head coach of the Cleveland Browns, will be the guest speaker. Tickets for the meal and induction ceremony are \$10 each and may be purchased at the Chamber of Commerce office, McGinnis Department Store, First Federal Savings and Loan, Goforth Plumbing, Kings Mountain High School, Kings Mountain Herald or from any member of the Hall of Fame Committee.)

Bethlehem fielded teams.

"There were a lot of outstanding ballplayers," he recalled. "Names like W.D. Morrison, Henry Ford, Welsey and Grier Moss, Willie McGinnis, Al Haynes, Rocky Ford, Willis King, Boyce Henry Stone, the Stewarts, Hugheses, Sipes, Pearsons, and Guytons come to mind."

Moss organized the Kings Mountain Vets in 1946 and many of his players are still well known around the area. Fred Withers, who coached baseball for many years at Kings Mountain High, and Grover's John Gold made an unbeatable keystone combination. Some of the other standouts included Don Parker, a pitcher who also coached and taught at KMHS for many years; Gus Hartsoe, Red Ormand, and Charlie Ballard. All of them played some pro ball.

"We were in a very fast semi-pro league," he recalled. "We played four games a week. Charlie Ballard and Don Parker were both outstanding pitchers. Charlie and Boyce Henry Stone signed pro contracts and played several years in the Western Carolinas League."

Moss organized the WCL in 1948 but it wasn't successful at that time. After serving several years in front office work from Rock Hill, S.C., to Wausau, Wis., Moss returned to Kings Mountain in 1959 and re-organized the league.

"It's the only league that's been re-organized since the decline of major league baseball in the fifties," recalled Moss. "It gave North Carolina more professional baseball teams than any other state."

Moss was pro baseball's youngest president when he organized the WCL in 1948, and today he's the dean of league presidents in terms of years served (29).

"Taking the WCL from a semi-pro league to a professional baseball league was an exciting time for me," he said. "Being young and having such an outstanding group of managers to work with that first year really impressed me."

His initial managers were all former major leaguers. They included Wes Ferrell at Marion, Johnny Allen at Lincolnton, Jess Hill at Forest City, Les McGarity at Morganton, Eddie Yount at Newton, Claude Jonnard at Lenoir, Rube Wilson at Shelby and Charlie Munday at Hendersonville.

"Most of them were old enough to be my father, and most of the players were older than I was," he recalled.

During the forties, Moss also directed the popular Western North Carolina Baseball Tournament at Kings Mountain, promoted the High School Harvest Bowl for the Lions Club here and promoted horse shows, basketball tournaments and other activities.

He served as general manager of the Rock Hill Chiefs of the Tri-State League in 1949 and then joined the Detroit Tigers minor league system as a general manager from 1950-54. During that time he also was general manager of the Wausau Muskies football team in the Central States Pro Football League. The team won the league title three straight years, Moss won the league's Top General Manager Award in 1953 and

many of their players signed NFL contracts.

"Being general manager of the Muskies was an interesting experience for me," he recalled. "We had 11 All-Americans but they never reached their potential. That showed me that enthusiasm, desire and dedication sometimes replaces talent."

When Moss returned to re-organize the WCL his plans hit several roadblocks before he met former major league Branch Rickey, who financed the entire operation the first year. After that the league took off.

Some of the WCL's early stars included Steve Carlton of Rock Hill, Nolan Ryan of Greenville, and Larry Bowa of Spartanburg. All made their mark on major league baseball and over 400 others have followed them.

"I remember going in and congratulating Nolan Ryan after he pitched his first game in the league and struck out 17," Moss said. "Four of those strikeouts were by Larry Bowa. Ryan was the fastest pitcher I've ever seen. I thought Bob Feller was fast but I have to think Ryan was faster. I know he was the fastest ever in this league."

Two of Moss's all-time favorites were Kings Mountain's Jake Early and George Wilson. Both returned home after their major league prime to coach and play in the WCL.

"Jake Early had the best arm ever in the major leagues," says Moss. "I remember sitting behind home plate in a World Series game at Riverfront Stadium one year with Dusty Gardner of Gastonia and Billy Hitchcock, who played and managed in both major leagues."

"Some guy tried to steal second base and Johnny Bench of the Reds gunned him down. Dusty Gardner turned to Billy Hitchcock and said, 'doesn't he have the best throwing arm you've ever seen on a catcher', and Hitchcock said, 'no, the best throwing catcher I've ever seen was from John Henry's hometown, Jake Willard Early'."

"Now, George Wilson was quite a character," Moss smiled. "He could hit a baseball at any level and he still holds the minor leagues' home run records. I've heard a lot of great stories on him."

Moss recalled that when Wilson was managing in the WCL he was fined for being ejected from a game. "He didn't pay his fine so I

suspended him until he paid it," Moss recalled. "A couple of days later I was over at Ted Gamble's service station getting gas and he told me George had been in there laughing about it and saying 'the Prexy gave me a couple days off so I'm going fishing.' I was getting ready to go to Greenville but I went back to the office and told the secretary to lift George Wilson's suspension. When George got down to Myrtle Beach there was a note in the motel telling him that his suspension had been lifted and the team owner wanted him to return to manage the ballclub."

Moss's baseball promotions have earned him numerous awards, including the coveted Will Wynne Award which goes each year to the North Carolinian contributing the most to baseball, and the Governor's Baseball Award for the most outstanding contribution to North Carolina baseball. He's also a member of the American Legion Baseball Hall of Fame, has won the League Award from the National Association for excellence in league operation and attendance, and in 1963 won the President's Trophy, which is the most prestigious award given by the National Association to a minor league executive.

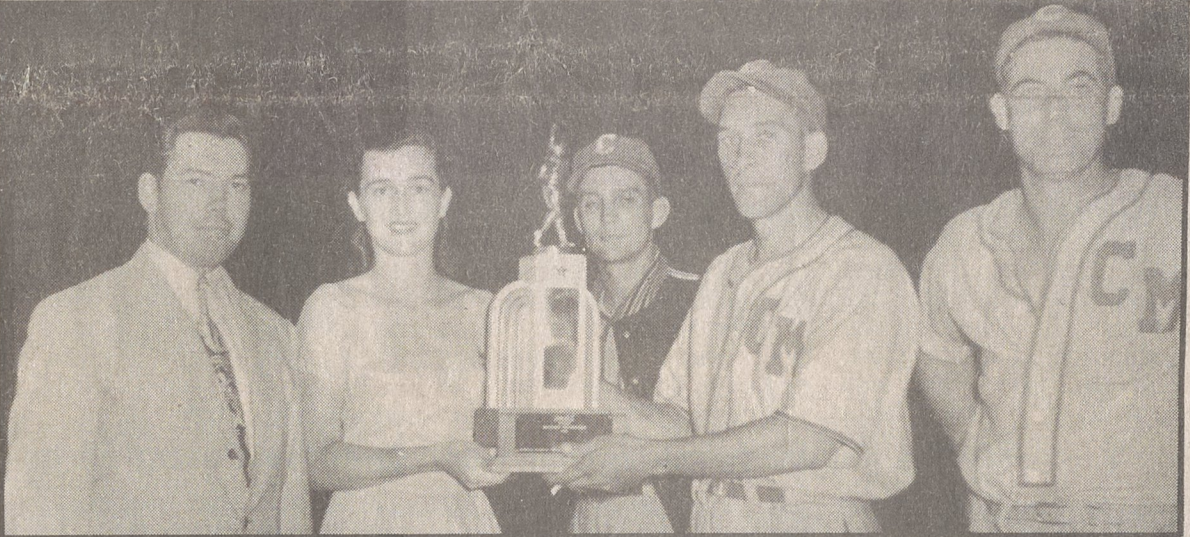
But he says he'll rank the Kings Mountain Hall of Fame Award as tops because it's coming from people in the community. "I think a Hall of Fame is a tremendous thing for a small community and I'm honored to be a recipient," he said.



JOHN HENRY CONGRATULATES OWNER BUCK MAUNEY OF THE LINCOLNTON CARDINALS, WINNERS OF THE FIRST WCL PENNANT IN 1948. IN BACKGROUND IS FORMER KINGS MOUNTAIN COACH AND PRINCIPAL, FRED WITHERS, WHO WAS A SECOND BASEMAN FOR THE LINCOLNTON CLUB.



JOHN HENRY CHATS WITH JOHN McHALE, CENTER, NOW PRESIDENT OF THE MONTREAL EXPOS, AND MIKE TRESH, CATCHER FOR THE WHITE SOX, AT DETROIT IN 1952.



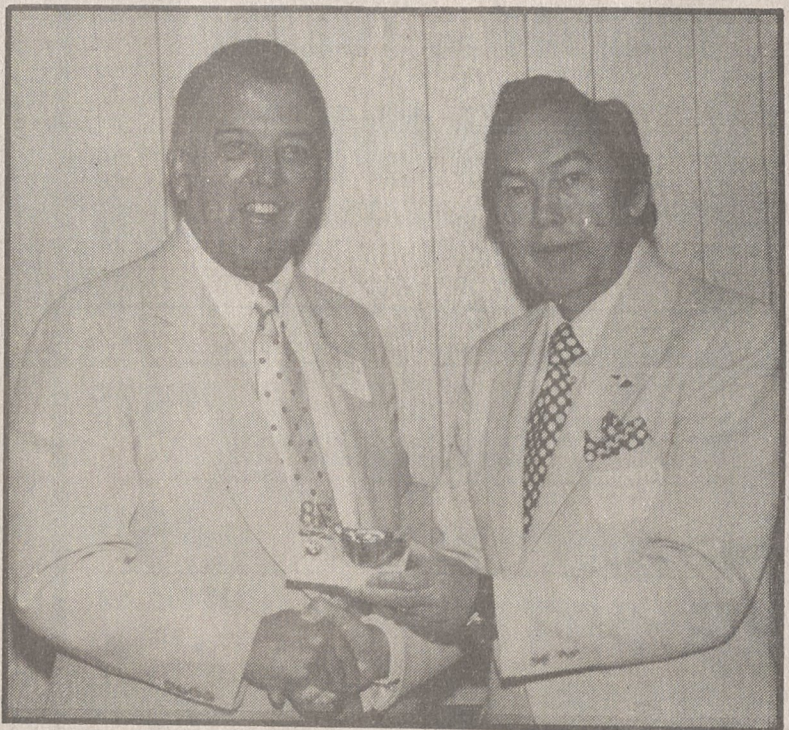
CAROLINA MILLS OF MAIDEN WON FIRST KM BASEBALL TOURNAMENT. LEFT TO RIGHT, JOHN MOSS, MISS KINGS MOUNTAIN PEGGY SMITH, AND CAROLINA PLAYERS HUGH POOVEY, BILL GAITHER AND HOMER SIGMON.



JOHN HENRY WITH THE LATE JOHNNY JOHNSON, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION, AND COMMISSIONER AND MRS. BOWIE KUHN AT YANKEE-DODGER SERIES IN L.A.



JOHN HENRY WITH CURRENT COMMISSIONER PETER UEBEROFF



JOHN HENRY WITH BOBBY BRAGAN, FORMER MANAGER OF ATLANTA BRAVES