

A Baseball Rookie Says "Thanks, Ken!"

By ROBERT L. WILLIAMS

Thirty-eight years ago last June, a kid just out of high school pitched his first professional baseball game. Like all rookies facing a teamful of professionals, he was nervous, frightened, and totally bewildered.

He was so tense that when, with two men out and the tying and winning runs on base and the batter had hit a ground ball between first and second bases, he forgot to cover first base.

So the first baseman, a grizzled veteran named Ken, fielded the ball, plodded clumsily and painfully across a huge segment of the infield, and slid with agonizing pain into first base in time to retire the runner and save the rookie's first pro game.

Ken was very slow in getting to his feet, and the crowd politely applauded as he limped off the field.

But what most of them did not know is that a few years earlier Ken was one of the finest baseball players ever to perform in this area. But when World War II broke out, Ken gave up his dreams of playing in the major leagues and traded his baseball uniform for a khaki one, he traded his bat for an M-1 rifle, and he swapped his fleetness of foot for the horrors of a foxhole.

One winter in Germany left him with feet so badly frozen that he could barely walk when the war was over. Still, like so many great athletes who paid the price of war, he returned to civilian life with his dreams, if not his entire body, intact. He signed a

minor league contract and eventually led the league in home runs and set a team home run record that lasted for years.

He could play only one position now -- first base -- and even there he needed all the help he could get from other players to keep him from looking pitifully inept as a fielder.

Occasionally the fans booted him when he was not able to make a fairly easy play. But they did not know what days in a foxhole in sub-zero weather can do to a person's athletic ability.

Nor was Ken alone. Gene Bearden won 20 games in his rookie season with the Cleveland Indians, despite the fact that he had steel plates where his skull should have been. Lou Brissie managed to pitch for the Philadelphia Athletics for several years, although he needed countless operations to remove the shrapnel fragments from his legs.

More recently, a local kid named Doug returned from the battlegrounds of the world minus both arms and one leg.

"I can still handle life," he said. "That is, I can handle all of it but slick metal doorknobs."

His hooks where his hands had been could not grasp the metal tightly enough to turn the knob.

But Doug went on to prove that, scholastically, socially, and every other way, he could handle it and handle it masterfully.

Another kid named Cal came home from Viet Nam but left his legs in an army hospital. Even when all the handicapped parking spaces at the college he attended were taken up by healthy and thoughtless kids who had

never known problems, he never complained -- not even when he had to walk slowly on his artificial limbs across an entire campus drenched in a cold winter rain.

A gentleman named Bill lay in the snow on a hillside in Germany and closed his eyes and waited for the pistol shot that would end his life. A POW, he had been taken out to be executed, and he still, more than four decades later, has nightmares about that day when he waited for the gunshot that never came.

Even those who were never wounded or captured and who came home able to resume their lives left a great deal of themselves in the military barracks. They gave up at least two years while those who somehow were missed by the draft stayed home and gained two years or more in salaries, job experience, and just happy living.

And now, 38 years later, a rookie pitcher who in his first pro game remembers that he was so excited about winning his first game that he forgot to thank Ken for the agonizing play that saved the game.

I'd like to do that now. Thanks, Ken, for the game. And for all it cost you. And for all you gave so that games can still be played the American way.

And thank you, Gene. And Lou, and Doug, and Cal, and Bill, and all of the veterans who were men and women enough to put their country ahead of their own happiness and welfare.

In a nation that forgets too quickly, some of us remember.

KMBC Basketball Sign-Up Underway

Registration is underway for Kings Mountain Boys Club basketball.

Boys ages seven to 16 may join. There is no fee.

Registration will be held each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday through December 3. Team selection will be on Sat., Dec. 10 at 2 p.m. at the Central School gym.

Club Director, Danny McDowell, states that the basketball program is designed to teach boys basic fundamental skills,

sportsmanship and teamwork.

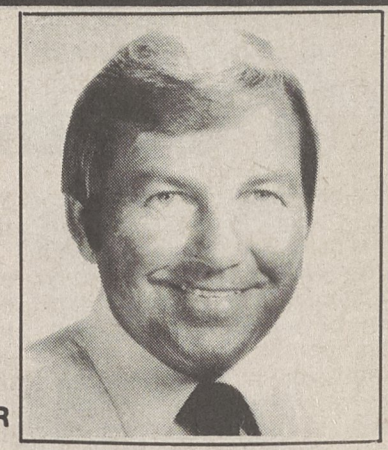
This year, Kings Mountain will play teams from Concord, Shelby, Charlotte, Asheville, Burlington, Monroe, Wilmington, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Statesville, Gaffney, Columbia, Tennessee, Florida and New York. The team will also play in the N.C. Junior Olympics and the Tarheel State Games tournaments.

Club hours are Tuesday and Thursday from 4-8 p.m. and Saturday from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. The club is located on the campus of Central School.

For more information, call Danny McDowell at 739-7161 during club hours, Tom Bennett at 739-3667, or Bobby Bell at 734-0046.

Upcoming events at the Boys Club include ping pong tournaments, one-on-one games, pool tournament, free throw contest, hot shot contest, skating, and attending several college basketball games. The club will also host the AAU 13-under state tournament at Kings Mountain High School and Kings Mountain Junior High.

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