



**CHARLIE BALLARD, NOW AND THEN** - Charlie Ballard, left, is all smiles now that he's retired and has the time to enjoy hobbies and helping his neighbors with their handy work. In the photos at right,

Ballard is pictured when he was a first baseman for Shelby's professional baseball team in the Western Carolinas League.

**Going into KM Hall Of Fame**

## Charlie 'Lefty' Ballard, Excelled In Baseball

(ED. NOTE - Charlie Ballard is one of three men who will be inducted into the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame at the annual dinner and induction ceremony Thursday night, May 24, at 7 p.m. at the Kings Mountain Community Center. Tickets are \$10 each and may be purchased at McGinnis Department Store, Plonk Brothers, C&S Mart, Western Auto, Sagesport, the Kings Mountain Herald, Kings Mountain Chamber of Commerce, and from John McGinnis, Carl Champion, Dr. John McGill, Perry Champion, Mearl Valentine and Gary Stewart).

Kings Mountain's Charlie Ballard was a "natural" when it came to playing baseball.

He could dominate a baseball game much like a 7-footer controls a basketball game.

When the home team was at the plate, Ballard got the big hits and RBIs. Throughout his career, starting on the sandlots of Kings Mountain as a kid and continuing throughout high school, American Legion, college and several years of pro ball, he never hit under .300.

When the home team was in the field, Ballard was the pitching ace, mowing down opposing hitters with his fast ball and sharp breaking curve. He was a strike-out artist. Early in his life someone dubbed him as "Lefty" and it stuck throughout his baseball career.

Ballard was the star of Kings Mountain High's 1941 Western Conference championship baseball team. The Mountaineers compiled a 17-1 record. Ballard was 12-1 and struck out 156 batters in 61 innings. That's an average of over 2.5 strikeouts per inning.

After graduating from KMHS, Ballard was offered a contract by the Brooklyn Dodgers but turned it down because he wanted a college education. He weighed several scholarship offers, including some from Stanford, Texas, Texas A&M, North Carolina and Duke, but decided on nearby Lenoir-Rhyne College "because I was in love and wanted to stay close to home."

Ballard's college career--and his pitching career--was interrupted by World War Two. After one year at L-R, he was drafted into the military. He lost his footing and fell off the back of a military truck and injured his pitching arm.

"We were supplying the infantry with ammo and supplies," he recalled. "We were down on the beach and had these long concrete slabs that they stored supplies on. It was raining and we were putting a tarp over the Army truck. I heard some commotion and firing up the beach and decided to get off. It was wet and I fell off. It didn't hurt too bad but it stung. But I never could throw after that. I did have a doctor look at it and he wanted to send me to John Hopkins to operate but I didn't want to do that."

After returning to L-R after the war, Ballard concentrated on playing first base and led the Bears in hitting. After college, he played first base and the outfield for several years with the Kings Mountain Vets and for several teams in the Western Carolinas League.

There's no doubt in Ballard's mind that he could have played in the major leagues, either as a pitcher before his arm injury, or as a first baseman afterward.

"I had several more opportunities to sign," he said. "But I was playing with Shelby in the Western Carolinas League at the time and also operating a business in Kings Mountain. The Shelby owner was paying good money at the time, and even though I had opportunities to play in higher levels of baseball, I just couldn't afford it."

Ballard said playing baseball was always a thrill, regardless of the level of competition.

"My biggest thrill as a child was getting to play baseball," he noted. "People would allow us to have an old piece of property to clean off and make a baseball field. Back in the thirties cotton was pretty much king. Everybody was planting cotton and it was sometimes



**KMHS STRIKEOUT ARTIST** - Charlie Ballard is pictured above during his days at Kings Mountain High School. He pitched the Mountaineers to the Western Conference championship in 1941, compiling a 12-1 record and striking out 156 batters in 61 innings. He later pitched and played first base at Lenoir-Rhyne College and played several years of professional baseball in this area.

hard to make a ball field but we had some good people over in the Phenix Mill area that let us use their land."

Ballard recalled that all the neighborhood children would rush home from school to do their chores quickly so they could play baseball until dark.

"Of course, back then you didn't have a lot of money to buy balls and bats," he said. "But all the mills had teams back then that played inner-city ball several times a week. When they'd break a bat they'd give

them to us and we'd tack and tape them and use them. When the cover tore off the ball, you taped them and continued to use them."

Ballard began playing high school and legion ball at the age of 12. He started playing in Kings Mountain but in the years when KM did not field a team, he'd play for the Shelby Juniors.

"We had good high school teams in 1941 and '42," he recalled. "We missed out on winning the conference championship in 1940 by losing our last game, and

then we won it the next year. We had some real good players."

Joining Ballard on the '41 championship team, which was coached by A.E. "Red" Smart, were Floyd Smith, Loyd Early, Jimmie Willis, James Gibson, Herbert Mitcham, James Alexander, John George, Eugene Wright, Curt Gaffney, Foley Cobb, Luther Ware, Gene Tignor, George Womack and Norman Roper.

The '41 team was similar to the current Mountaineer nine in that it had good hitting, defense, scored a lot of runs, and had good pitching in Ballard, George, Cobb and Gibson.

The Mountaineers' most lop-sided victories were over Lincolnton, 16-3 and 18-3. They defeated Bessemer City 11-2 and 9-5. They won their first five games before falling to defending champion Hickory, 4-2, despite 13 strikeouts by Ballard. They later avenged that loss, 4-1, as Ballard fanned 14.

Ballard struck out 18 in a 4-1 win over Cherryville and Ballard hurled a three-hitter and struck out 13 in a 1-0 win over Morganton which clinched the conference championship. The Mounties defeated Shelby in the season's finale as Ballard pitched a four-hitter and struck out 15.

The '41 Mountaineers didn't hit as many home runs as the current team but the parks in those days were huge, Ballard said. "Most of them didn't have fences. To hit a home run, you had to hit it a long way and get it between the outfielders. But we had several guys that hit a lot of them."

Ballard said it's hard to recall specific games over the years and how he performed in them but he recalled one hilarious incident in a game at Morganton.

"I believe that was the game we tied the championship down," he recalled. "Jimmie Willis, who is now deceased, was batting and Buck Early, who had gotten a hit, was on first base. Jim Willis got a hit off the end of the bat that went to the opposite field (right field). Buck wasn't the swiftest runner in the conference but got around third and was trying to get home and his pants fell down. He finally got to home plate and we won the game. I believe that's the funniest thing I ever saw."

The '40 team finished 16-2. The Mounties dropped an early game to Cherryville 4-0 and lost the championship by losing to Shelby 5-4 in the season's finale.

Ballard pitched a one-hitter and struck out 19 batters in seven innings in a 9-1 victory over R-S Central. He struck out 18 and had a no-hitter going until the seventh inning in a 6-1 win over Shelby.

Ballard recalled hurling several no-hitters during his high school and legion careers. One was for the Shelby legion team against an all-star team which included major leaguers Tom Wright and Bud Hardin.

The Mountaineers and KM Legion teams played their home games at the old park which was located at the current site of the American Legion building. Before that park was built the local park was located where the old Kings Mountain water plant is now.

"I didn't get to play on that field," he recalled. "I was a young boy but I remember going over there. It had an old wooden fence around it and about half of it was falling down, but the field was in good shape. It was actually a better field than the field at the American Legion."

Ballard retired from baseball in the early fifties and was a personnel manager at several local plants before retiring two years ago. He took up golf at the age of 40 and won the Kings Mountain Country Club championship two years in a row. One year he defeated his son, Mike.

Ballard has since given up golf for a new love, fishing. He fishes just about every day, either for stripers on Lake Murray or the Congaree River, or for largemouth at small farm ponds.

He also does a lot of "handy man" work for friends and neighbors.

"I do a little electrical work, plumbing and carpentry," he noted. "I just do it for families that appreciate it. I don't charge anything. It's for people who have been good to me."

"I really enjoy retirement," he added. "It allows me to do things I always wanted to do but never had the time to do them."