

Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame Special Report

Jimmy Littlejohn going into Sports Hall of Fame

By GARY STEWART
Editor of the Herald

When Jimmy Littlejohn played football at Kings Mountain High School from 1955-58, he wasn't a star. In fact, he wasn't even on the starting team.

As Littlejohn himself says, he was a "scrub" - one of the bench-warmers...a guy with a lot of love for the game but not a whole lot of athletic ability.

Most of his playing time was confined to kick-off teams, but what Littlejohn learned on the sidelines from outstanding coaches such as Shu Carlton, John Gamble and Don Parker helped prepare him for a life of service to young athletes in the Kings Mountain area.

For his contributions to young people in 34 years as a Pop Warner football coach, 30 years as a youth league basketball coach and as the "reorganizing" athletic officer of the Post 155 American Legion baseball team, Littlejohn has been selected as one of the four inductees into the Kings Mountain Sports Hall of Fame Monday night, April 18 at 7 p.m. at the Kings Mountain Community Center.

For all of the people who have worked with Littlejohn over the years and have witnessed his un-sung commitment to young people, his selection was overdue. But Littlejohn accepted the announcement with humility.

"It's scary, really, just being mentioned in the same breath with people like Shu Carlton, John Gamble, Don Parker, Kevin Mack, Pat Murphy, and the other great athletes and coaches who are in the Hall of Fame," he said.

Littlejohn has spent just about every late summer and fall afternoon for the past 39 years at City Stadium. When he was a player at KMHS, the Mountaineers played their home games there. The Pop Warner teams still play their games there and, rain or shine or in 90-plus degree heat in August or sub-freezing temperatures in late-November, Littlejohn is just as much a fixture as the old concrete bleachers which Mountaineer fans packed into to see the championship teams of the fabulous fifties.

"I've been going to City Stadium every summer and fall for a long time," says Littlejohn. "Every year people ask me when I'm going to quit. It gets harder every year but I'll probably do it as long as I feel pretty good."

Littlejohn has missed only one football game since some friends talked him into helping with the West School midget team in 1960.

"I helped David Marlowe with what was a little pick-up team really," he recalled. "The city decided to have a four-team midget league with teams from West, Central, North and East. The school system didn't sponsor the teams but we took our names after the schools. Jake Early (former major league baseball player and then City Recreation Director) got us some equipment."

The teams played each other twice during the regular season, plus picked up games against teams from other towns. At the end of the season the first place team played an all-star team comprised of players from the other three squads.

A few years later, Grover and South joined the league and midget football was alive and well in Kings Mountain. Several years later the Optimist Club began co-sponsoring the program with the city and junior pee wees, pee wees and junior midgets teams were added. Several years later the midget program was dropped when the school system went to a middle school concept and began drawing players from the same age group as midgets.

Littlejohn tried to pass along the knowledge he gained from his high school coaches to his young players.

"Coach Gamble taught me all the football I know," he said. "I don't know why, but when Coach Gamble would get his captains together he'd take me along with them. I guess I was kind of the captain of the second string."

Through the years Littlejohn has coached some players who went on to become outstanding high school players. One, Kevin Mack, even went on to help lead Clemson's Tigers to the NCAA championship and became Rookie of the Year in the NFL with the Cleveland Browns.

While turning out good high school players is fine, Littlejohn said his primary goal is to give the youngsters an opportunity to play and have fun at an early age.

"The main thing is to give them a place to play," he says. "If kids are playing ball they're not getting into trouble. We're out to help the community more than the high school. I'm not saying the boys are any better or worse off from playing football, but at least during the time they're practicing and playing ball they're staying out of trouble."

Although football is his first love, Littlejohn enjoys all sports and helped develop outstanding basketball and baseball programs for the city.

In the early sixties, he was the first coach of the Optimist Club boys basketball team and he remained in that position until just a few seasons ago. Littlejohn, Mearl Valentine, former Recreation Director Roy Pearson and several others around town organized the league.

"We didn't even have uniforms," Littlejohn recalled. "We just had jerseys. We started out with four teams and I coached the Optimist. I don't remember who sponsored the other teams."

Littlejohn left the basketball program four years ago to pursue another dream. Being a long-time member of American Legion Post 155, he had a burning desire to revive the legion baseball program. With the help of retired Kings Mountain Fire Chief Gene Tignor and many other baseball enthusiasts, the post launched a major fund-raising effort which allowed them to begin the program again in 1990.

What really spurred the interest was the 1989 KMHS baseball team which caught fire late in the season and won the state 3-A championship after finishing second in the regular season Southwestern Conference chase. Kings Mountain fans, not wanting to stay away from the game after that, found them-

Hall of Fame Facts

- Date **Monday, April 8**
- Time **7:00 pm**
- Place **Community Center**
- Cost **\$10.00 per person**
- Speaker **Jeff Mullins
Basketball Coach
UNC Charlotte**
- Inductees **Zeb Plonk
Grace Page
Jimmy Littlejohn
1955 KMHS Football Team**

selves going to Bessemer City and Shelby to see their own hometown favorites play for other towns.

"I went up to Shelby to see Shelby play Bessemer City in the Area IV playoffs, but it was like Kings Mountain playing Kings Mountain," Littlejohn said. "Bessemer City, which was supposed to be the best team, had Chad and Chris Plonk, Paul Brannon and a couple other guys from Kings Mountain, and Shelby had Stuart Spires, Keith Allen and some others, and Shelby eliminated them. Gene Tignor and I were talking and he said it sure would be nice to have all of those boys back on the same team. I said we couldn't get them on the same team because people would say we were having legion baseball just for one year to

take advantage of their talent. Gene said we should have a team anyway and build for the future.

"We decided to have a team in 1990, but we had no idea that we'd have all of our Kings Mountain guys back on the same team," he said. "I went to meetings in Shelby and they said they wouldn't release anybody to play for us, so I didn't even go to Bessemer City. But some people familiar with the Legion baseball program told me there was a new rule which stated that if I could get affidavits signed by every ballplayer they could come back to Kings Mountain. That got us going but we were going to have a team no matter what. We were lucky in that respect, and we've been doing good ever since."

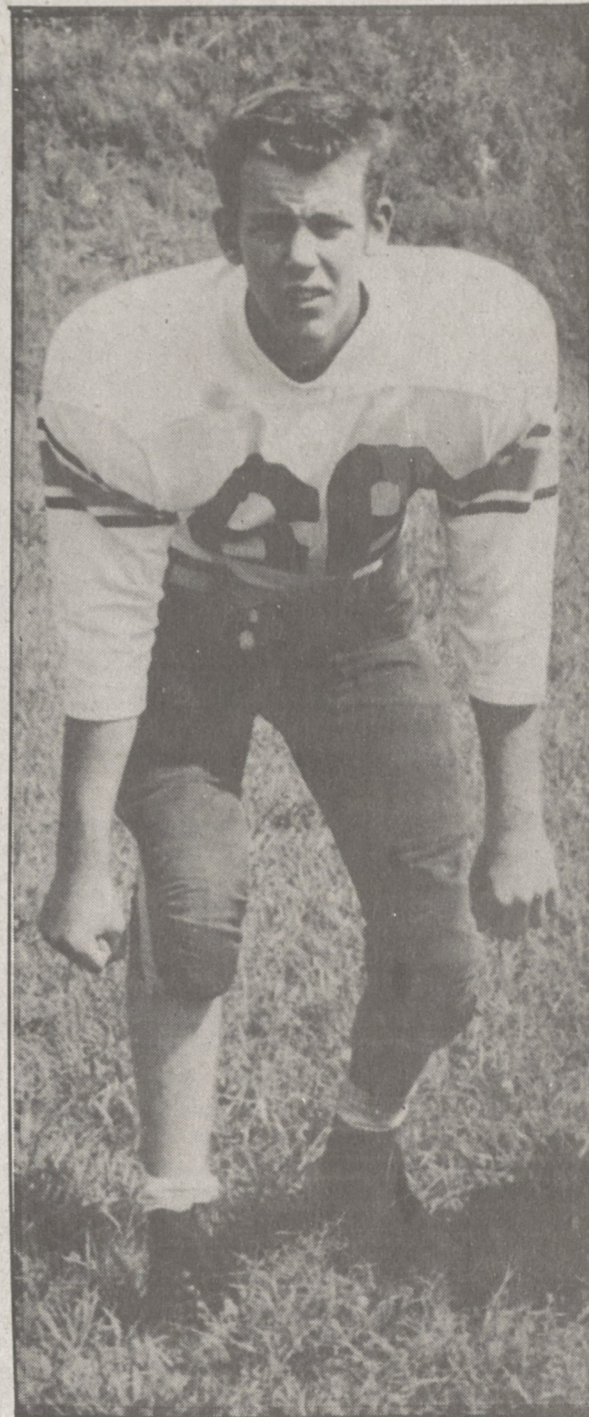
With dedicated behind-the-scenes effort from legionnaires and volunteers, outstanding player talent and the field leadership of former KMHS coaches Bruce Clark and Ronny Funderburke, the program not only got off the ground but flourished. While critics were saying a team drawing from just one small high school couldn't compete against schools drawing from several large schools, Post 155 was posting four consecutive winning seasons and playing for the Area IV championship twice. In 1990 they were eliminated from the playoffs by a Caldwell County team which eventually played for the Southeast Regional championship, and in 1992 they eliminated a powerful Pineville nine before losing in the Area IV finals to Taylorsville which went on to finish second in the state.

"I'm not taking the credit for it," said Littlejohn. "There's a bunch of people at the American Legion that got the program going. I was just the athletic officer."

But, much of the success goes back to that same love of the game and commitment to young people that kept Littlejohn coming back to City Stadium day after day for 34 years.

"Sometimes you wonder if anybody knows you're down there but, even if they don't, it's worth it," he says.

Now, he knows. Somebody was paying attention.



Jimmy Littlejohn was a reserve linebacker on the 1958 Kings Mountain High School football team.



1991 AMERICAN LEGION TEAM - Jimmy Littlejohn helped revive American Legion baseball in Kings Mountain in 1990. He is pictured here with the 1991 Post 155 team. Front row, left to right, T.G. Goforth, Mike Smith, Todd Ware, Raymond Couch and Rusty Burgess. Second row, Tommy Payne, Doran Moore, Chris Rider, Rick Marr, Stephen Fisher and Damon Putnam. Third row, Jimmy Littlejohn, Doug Bridges, Caja Ormand, Shane Webb, David Jenkins, David Bell and Robbie Ruff.



1961 MIDGET CHAMPIONS - This is Jimmy Littlejohn's West midget team which won the city championship in 1961 with a 6-0 record. Front row, left to right, Fred Clary, Tommy Day, Wayne Mullinax, Ray Henderson, Ricky Grahl and Gene Putnam. Second row, Ray Miller, Wayne Odell, Mike Goforth, Scott Cloninger, Fred Wright, Ricky Stewart, Gene Hammett. Third row, Jimmy Littlejohn, Ben Grimes, John Van Dyke, Steve Wilson, Dean Henderson, Jay Powell, Phillip Putnam and Coach Vick Smith. Not pictured, Terry Bridges, Roy Medlin and Mike Boheler.